

Kobold King: Volume 1

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Author
Syousa.

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Map of the Kingdom of Igris (Central)

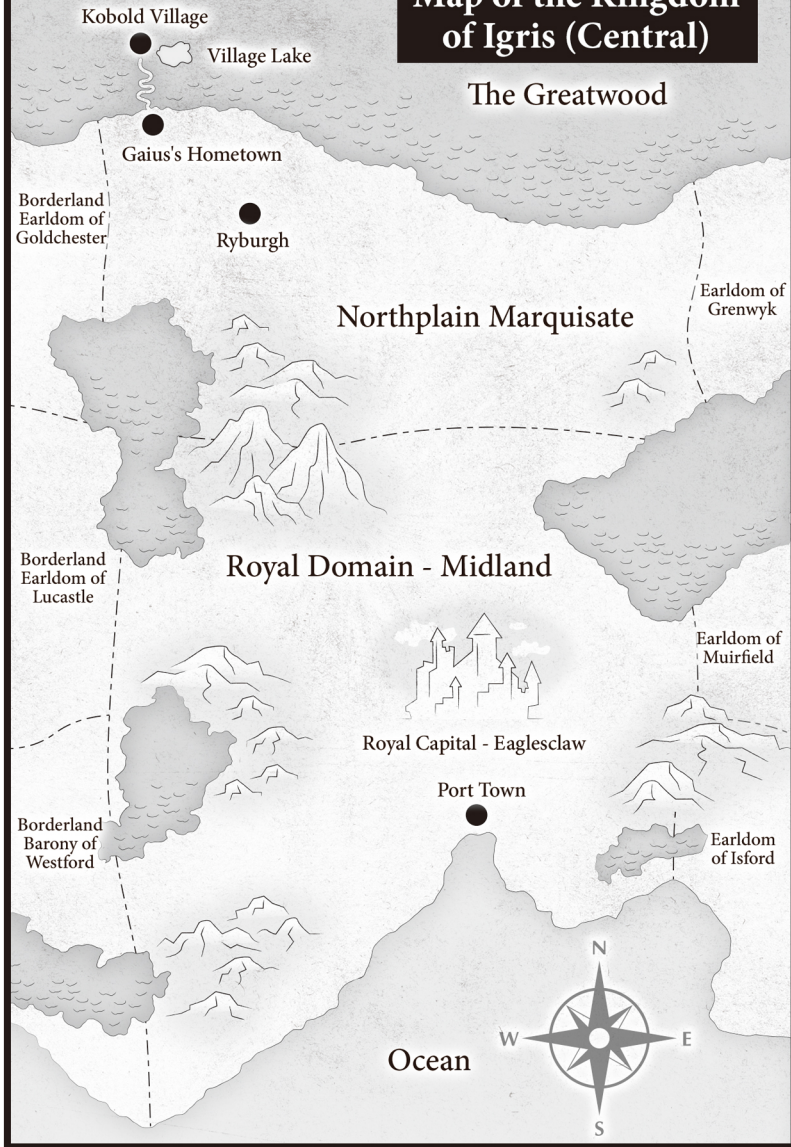


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Prologue

On a twisting, turning road that makes its way through the forest...

To be more precise, the path was nothing more than an old riverbed, the water having dried out long before, leaving behind a trail resembling a road. A wagon drawn by a beast of burden made its leisurely way along the winding course over the sand and pebbles.

The vehicle itself was perfectly unpretentious, and would have been equally at home in the royal capital, on a highway leading to the city, or on the backwater roads of a rural town. It was a perfectly ordinary covered wagon. Though... Perhaps the word “humble” would be a better description than “ordinary.”

There was nothing unassuming about its cargo: plows, hoes, and other farming tools, along with seeds and seedlings for planting. It also carried fabrics made from hemp and felt, and other general goods. The driver might have been a peasant on his way home from a trip for supplies, having stocked up on all his daily necessities.

The creature pulling the wagon, however, was very much not an everyday sight.

It carried itself on earth-colored legs, taking one heavy step forward after another. Its eyes were two pitch-black holes that saw nothing. Its body was made up of a mass of rounded clumps, as if a child had piled clay into only the vaguest shape of a horse that bears little resemblance to the actual animal.

A golem horse, fashioned out of earth and animated by magic, is what pulled this otherwise unassuming cart. It was certainly not something that a poor peasant would put to use for a mere shopping trip. A more cynical viewer might say that an animated pile of dirt is a steed more befitting of a commoner, but within that earthen body lay a core of silver mythril, a renowned magical metal. The value of that core was far more than any commoner could ever hope to possess, not just for the precious metal, but for the complex runes etched all along its surface. Why would such a thing be put to use pulling a wagon...? It's a strange tale.

While we're on the subject of strange, the person in the driver's place also looked out-of-place. He wore a tunic woven with metal plates, otherwise called a jack, over leather armor. The man himself bore a striking resemblance to a large boulder. Beneath his close-

cropped grey hair, his face was covered with countless scars. The most notable of these was a large sword wound running down the right side of his face, so fresh it seemed that it might split his head open from forehead to chin at any moment. The severe look on his face would cause anyone to suspect him of villainy. Such an expression had surely made more than a few babies break into tears, and caused ladies to turn away in distaste.

In addition to the massive wound down the right side of his face, the left side was similarly marked. A thick, tattoo-like line ran down from his hairline and through his eyebrow, as if it had been purposefully drawn on to provide his visage with some symmetry.

This was no tattoo, however; it had been penned by magic. The line fractured just under his eye, breaking off in all directions. The result looked almost like a black rose.

He scratched at his stubbled jaw with thick fingers, his arms as massive as logs. One could clearly tell that even under his armor, the man was unusually powerful, with solid muscle bulging across his shoulders and down his limbs. It would be easy to imagine such a man had led a life full of swinging swords and brandishing axes.

As he drove his simple cart, the man examined his surroundings with a keen eye.

After a spell, the dense forest gradually thinned out on both sides of the riverbed and a vast field spread out, as if this part of the forest had gone bald. The river-road continued on past the forest's edge before stopping at the foot of a small hill in the distance. In the center of that field lay a village.

It wasn't a terribly special village, mind you. Certainly it was nothing compared to the sights of the capital, where this man had once lived. In fact, it looked meager even when compared to the clusters of humble farming communities one could find out in the countryside.

The houses here were little more than holes dug in the ground, out of which sprouted pillars holding up roofs of sod and grass. To put more of a point on it, the people who called this place home lived in pits. And yet, these pits were considerably smaller than one might expect.

This "village" was nothing more than a few dozen of these primitive dwellings surrounded by a simple fence. Some of the pits looked to be in the process of mid-construction, so it was possible that they were still expanding.

Just beyond the fence, a few half-prepared plots of land were scattered here and there. Unseen fires sent up the occasional column of smoke as the man made his way toward the village.

As he approached a break in the fence that passed for an entrance,

a small face suddenly popped up from behind the fence.

It belonged to a dog, a white puffball of a puppy, wagging its tail so hard that it threatened to fly off.

The man tugged on the reins to bring the golem to a halt before dropping down from the wagon onto one knee and throwing his arms open wide in invitation.

When the puppy reached the man, it planted its front paws on his knee, then with all its might opened its little mouth and shouted, "Welcome home, King!"

"It's good to be back." The man knelt over the small pup, bringing their faces close together. His battle scars, with his features so resembling a carnivorous beast's, were completely at odds with the gentle look in his eyes as he smiled.

Was he truly smiling, though...?

"Let's not do this so close to the cart, though. I've told you before that it's dangerous, haven't I?" The man chided the puppy in a low, calm voice, even as he began to gently pet it.

"Sorry, King! I'll be more careful."

"Make sure you do." The man scooped the tiny dog up into his arms and nuzzled his stubby cheek against the puppy's cottony one. The look on his stern face was nothing other than a giddy smile. As he held the puppy against his face, touching noses with it, another dog dashed to his side.

"Your Majesty...!" This one was slightly larger, with amber-colored fur.

More strikingly, this dog was walking on its hind legs.

"You're his big sister. You need to keep an eye on the little one, or he'll go running off just like this. That's no good, right?"

"...'M sorry." Though the scolding was gentle, the dog hung her head. When the white pup was placed back on solid ground, the amber-colored dog walked up to him...and punched him hard.

"It's your fault I got in trouble!"

"Owwww! Hey, she hit me!"

"All right, stop fighting." Scooping both dogs up in his arms, he climbed back into the wagon's seat, and the three of them made their way into the settlement. When they reached the village square, the cries of welcome resumed:

"Welcome home, Your Highness!"

"We all missed you!"

"Thank you for working so hard!"

The cart came to a stop, and dogs began crowding all around it. Astonishingly, every single one of them walked on its hind legs, like the amber-colored pup. The younger ones ran about unclothed, but some of the older-looking dogs wore simple tunics from hide or

bark. Others draped animal pelts over their shoulders. In their paws, they held axes and farming tools, pans and clay pots.

Despite their appearances, these weren't dogs at all.

They were an entirely different race—kobolds.

Neither dogs nor beastmen, kobolds were instead bonafide members of the fairy species.

The giant of a man welcomed all the kobolds that ran up to him with their tails wagging, patting some on the head and greeting others. After he made his rounds, he began unloading the various goods from his wagon.

“Oh, he's unpacking!”

“Let me help you with that!”

“Me too, me too!”

They pushed against one another, each one trying to get closer to the cart ahead of the others. Everywhere you might look, tails were wagging out of excitement and joy.

The huge, imposing man smiled right back at them.

This man's name...was Gaius.

Sir Gaius Beldarus; captain of the Knights of the Chain, the royal guard of the kingdom of Igris; and baron to the house of Beldarus.

At least, those had once been his titles. No longer, however. He had left all of that behind.

Kobold King—monster. The leader or highest-ranking member of a tribe of kobolds.

That one line was the only definition for the term, recorded in the Monster Encyclopedia of the Igris Adventurers' Guild.

That was this man's current title.

Chapter 1: The Black Rose of Igris

Hetty, a first-year student at the Royal Knight Academy, stood watch outside the castle gates.

She, like the other students, took turns “volunteering” one of their days off to assist with guard duty, one of the beautiful, long-standing, and frustrating traditions of that great establishment of learning. It was a punishing practice that robbed students of their precious free time in exchange for free labor, but one that had its own benefits. Helping at the gates allowed a student the chance to see each and every person who came in and out of the royal castle.

There were more visitors than merchants and traders; there were plenty of high-ranking ministers, knights, court officials, and nobles to meet. “Speaking with royalty” was also included in the job description, though only rarely. For apprentice knights like Hetty, this was a golden opportunity to make the acquaintance of well-placed members of society, like members of the court. Students with dreams of climbing the ranks would find out when a particular noble or soldier was scheduled to visit, and would purposely volunteer for guard duty on that day.

The way they sold themselves under the guise of “apprentice work” could hardly be called a good thing, but for these young men and women with dreams of worldly success, doing so was a natural means to an end. And so, they dressed themselves in their finest clothes, did their best to look like diligent students, and held on to the fleeting hope that they might one day catch the attention of an aristocrat. And, it turned out, one person had in fact caught the eye of a royal while manning that chore of a post, and had gone on to become captain of the knights.

It is human nature to hold onto hope, even if the odds of their dreams coming true is less than one in a million or even a billion. And Hetty, despite this being her first day on the job, was no exception.

Her expression was tense, her posture ramrod-straight. She executed each and every salute with speed, each movement perfectly smooth.

...Or so she tried. Instead, her nerves turned every motion into a trembling, clumsy mess.

A young noble scoffed at her. An elderly diplomat gave her a crinkly-eyed smile. A rotund trader gave her some small words of

encouragement. Through it all, Hetty continued to push herself to look as knightly as possible.

She looked through the gate to see Paul, her classmate and a fellow “volunteer helper.” He received guests and asked them required questions as they passed through, his expression slowly freezing into a blank stare. Each time he made an error in the process, a senior guard was close at hand to correct him. It seemed Hetty wasn’t the only one under strain.

However, after a repairman passed through the castle gates, the flow of guests seemed to suddenly dry up. Apparently people would come and go in waves throughout the day. With far fewer eyes on her, Hetty felt her tension wane, and she fought to stifle a yawn that threatened to escape her lips.

Seeing this, the older guard smiled and called out to her in appreciation.

“Just a little longer, miss. Then you can swap shifts with the lot back at the guardhouse. Chin up ’til...then...” The words trickled out as his face suddenly froze, and his gaze became fixed on the road leading up to the castle gates.

The knight stood at attention with blinding speed, his spine and spear perfectly straight. His face tightened into a tense expression, every part of him silently screaming “Don’t screw this up!” Hetty could even hear the man gulp for air.

She and Paul both stared blankly at him for a moment, until they turned to follow his gaze and realized why his demeanor had changed so suddenly.

Someone was approaching. A man clad in leather armor, with a cape around his shoulders and a sword at his side.

He stood nearly seven feet tall, and was so large that he might be mistaken for an oversized statue instead of a man.

His face was like a bad omen, his expression so stern that he appeared to be glaring. His mouth was drawn tight, as if barely suppressing rage. The figure he cut was more like a beast than a man; a lion, perhaps, or some other flesh-eating animal.

To top it all off, not only was his face covered in what looked like battle scars, some sort of tattoo was neatly incised into his left cheek. Not even the most generous interpretation would mistake him for an upright citizen.

Hetty’s feeling of dread grew so powerful that she nearly drew the sword at her hip out of reflex.

“Thank you for your service, Lord Beldarus!” the guard shouted in a too-shrill voice.

Lord Beldarus?! Hetty and Paul turned to one another when they heard the name.

That's him! Baron Gaius Beldarus! Captain of the Knights of the Chain. The famous knight who had made a name for himself fifteen years ago, during the Five-Year War between Igris and a number of formerly friendly nations along its border.

Even Hetty and Paul, who had only just started attending the Knight Academy, had heard his name. "Slayer of Fifty," "Gaius the Maneater," "Beldarus the Bloody-Bladed," "The Headhunter," "Ally-Killer." The man had many names, countless stories, and a fearsome reputation dogging his every move.

But his most famous alias stemmed from the cursed mark on his left cheek: "The Black Rose of Igris." One rumor has it that the mark had been placed on him by magicians from the eastern nations in an attempt to suppress the man's bloodlust. Another said it was a curse, a mark that spontaneously appeared as a result of the curses amassed by all the souls he'd slain.

He was no berserker; he was not a mindless killer driven by a vengeful spirit. No, he was a crystal-sharp distillation of human ferocity, cruelty, and madness. Everyone knew that about Baron Gaius Beldarus.

I-I-I can't afford to offend him! Hetty did her best to prevent her teeth from chattering, but she couldn't keep herself from trembling.

She looked across the gate, and saw that Paul was also shaking, his face pale. He was the one who had told her that Beldarus would cut down any young knight who displeased him.

It was unclear whether Gaius was aware of just how terrified they were of him as he approached the gate, but as he walked towards them, he turned towards the senior guard and shook his head.

"Fine work as always. But you don't have to call me 'Lord.' As of yesterday, I'm neither a noble nor a knight." His voice was low, slow, and heavy with dignity.

But to Hetty and Paul, who stood gripped in terror, that voice scoured their very souls like a ghastly echo emanating from a grave.

"Yes, Sir! I crave your pardon!"

"I do need entry, if you please. I have business with the seneschal; I need to turn in the keys to my knights' lodging."

"Understood! If you could please fill out these forms... Bring that clipboard over here already! Hop to it!"

"Y-Yessir! Right away, Sir!" The lead guard barked an order to Paul, then whipped around to speak to Hetty.

"Hetty! See to Lord Beldarus's belongings!"

"Er, I... That is, I'm no longer a noble..."

Oh, no! Don't say my name out loud! she moaned inwardly. *There's no-one who can help me if this guy remembers who I am!* Hetty willed herself forward on shaking legs. Lord Beldarus removed the sword

hanging at his side and bent over to hand it down to her.

“You may find it a tad heavy. Do be careful with it.”

“Y-Yessir!” Hetty stammered a reply and reached out with both hands to take the blade being offered to her. The scabbard pressed down into her hands under the considerable weight of the sword.

Whether it was because of her frayed nerves, or because the sword was much heavier than she’d expected...

...Hetty did an impressive job in almost immediately fumbling the sword to the ground.

I’m sorry, Mom... Today’s the day your daughter dies. This remarkably cogent thought flashed through her mind as the sword hit the cobblestones with a great **crash!**

The blood drained from her face as she stared fixedly at her own feet. She could see the ornamental detailing on the sword, now cracked and shattered. There was no mistaking that the sudden impact from the fall was to blame for the damage.

You’ve really done it now. Way to go, Hetty. Not only did you drop a warrior’s sword, the symbol of his skill and pride—and a really expensive sword, too—but you broke it. You smashed it right up.

And not just any warrior’s sword, no! The sword of Gaius the Cannibal, the Ally-Killer.

Hetty released the breath she’d been holding and closed her eyes.

“Well, well, well... Did the blade get broken? Let’s test it out on your neck and see.” And with those words—fwoosh—her head came clean off. ...Or so Hetty saw in her mind’s eye.

That’s just the kind of thing Beldarus the Bloody-Bladed would do... As Hetty lamented the untimely end of her all-too-short life, with tears welling up in her eyes, she opened them to find Lord Beldarus stooped over, picking up the shards one by one.

“M-M-My deepest apologies for this dreadful offense, Lord Beldarus!” The guard dropped to his knees and pressed his head against the cobblestones in fervent apology.

Gaius waved a hand in front of his face dismissively. “It was my fault. The sword is far too heavy. Are you hurt?” This last question was directed at Hetty, in a gentle voice.

“Ah-Ah-I-I-I’m fine, Sir...! I-I’m terribly sorreeeeeeeee...” Hetty was shaking so fiercely that she barely managed to get the words out.

“Is that so? Good.” Lord Beldaus casually collected the last of the fragments and tossed them into a nearby wastebasket.

“The sword was nothing but a decoration, to be worn only when attending the castle. I’m not going to be needing it any longer. Don’t let it bother you.”

“B-But—” Gaius held up a hand to cut the guard’s protests short and stood up.

He took the clipboard from Paul, whose brain seemed to have ceased functioning entirely. He patiently filled in his signature and his reason for coming to the castle and handed it back.

“You look like a student at the Knight Academy.” It took Hetty a moment to realize that this had been directed at her, but eventually she replied with “Yessir.”

“How old are you?”

“S-Seventeen, Sir!”

“Hmm...” Lord Beldarus removed a pouch from his belt and rummaged through it. He eventually produced something wrapped in paper and casually held it in front of Hetty’s face.

“I, uh...”

Seeing she was at a loss for words, Gaius simply said “For you,” and gestured for her to hold out her hand.

Hetty timidly reached out to accept it, after which Gaius gave another package to Paul.

“If you’ll excuse me.” With that, he turned toward the castle’s interior and walked away.

★

“The man’s fit only to swing a sword about!” Back at the guardhouse, as Hetty and Paul were on break, a student two years their senior was going on and on, smirking and laughing.

The second son of a viscount, he took every possible opportunity to look down his nose at the common folk. Because of this, Hetty and the others inwardly ignored him as best they could. The fact that he didn’t even realize the others were scorning him was truly unbecoming of a young noble.

“Oh? But Lord Beldarus was so frightening, and he looked so powerful.”

“He’s not Lord Beldarus anymore, or even the captain of the Knights of the Chain. He’s just another plebeian now.”

Hetty replied with another half-hearted “Oh?” and took a sip of her sugar-laden tea. The potent sweetness worked to soothe her fear-induced aches and pains.

“And that nickname of his, the ‘Slayer of Fifty’ or whatever? It has to be a sham.”

“Is that so?” Paul chimed in this time.

“Of course! It’s all just a load of leftover rumor from the war, together with his own braggart’s lies. I mean, the stories are simply unbelievable. One man cutting down fifty men? One man, making an entire enemy force run for cover?”

“Well, I suppose,” Hetty replied. *Honestly, having seen him in person, I can believe it,* she thought to herself.

“And for whatever reason, the last king, and the king before him, both bought into this farce. But now we have a proper king and prime minister who know how to deal with charlatans like him. Just because the man knows his way around a sword doesn’t mean he should be given rank and prestige that he doesn’t deserve. Now that he’s been exposed, he’s dropped all his titles and practically fled the capital...and good riddance, too!”

Hetty recalled Lord Beldarus’s words as she brought the teacup back to her lips. *So that’s why he said he wasn’t nobility anymore...*

“What a nut the previous king was. Giving the Beldarus name and a title to an illegitimate son. House Bargylus even ousted him because he was such a dimwit. Did you know that? Huh? The Academy teachers called a meeting and asked him all sorts of questions about tactics, and he couldn’t give even a halfway decent answer! And *somehow* this idiot was made captain of the guard?! What a laugh!” Paul glanced at the senior student out of the corner of his eye and nodded noncommittally.

“So, then, does that mean Lord...I mean, Mister Beldarus’s nickname ‘The Ally-Killer’ is another exaggerated rumor?” The young man stopped laughing when Hetty asked.

“No, that bit’s true.”

“Huh?”

“A young aristocrat told him off for the way he ran pell-mell across the battlefield, and the sword-for-brains cut him down right there and then where one and all could see it. They say some old sorcerer filled his head with all sorts of funny superstitions, too. Went and kidnapped a maiden and ate her right up, flesh and blood and all. That savage was hardly knight material at all, let alone an aristocrat.”

Hetty’s cheek twitched.

“You sure were lucky, wouldn’t you say? One wrong move and you might have been his next victim.” The smirk returned to the upperclassman’s face, and a chill ran down her spine.

So he really is that terrifying—an ally-slayer and a cannibal. It was just dumb luck that he let me live. A shiver raced along her back, and she crossed her arms. When she did, her hand pressed against something in her chest pocket.

That’s right... Lord Beldarus had handed her something small, wrapped in paper. From what she’d just heard, it couldn’t have been anything good. But it couldn’t have been poison...could it?

Hetty set the bag down in her lap and carefully unwrapped the paper, her hands trembling. There, in the bottom of the bag...

Meow.

...candies in the shape of cats’ faces peered up at her.

The forest was called “The Greatwood.”

It lay north of the Southern Kingdoms, and shared a border with Igris, the kingdom next to it, the kingdom next to that, and so on for a great distance. The vast forest stretched on and on, which is how the name came to be.

...No, that’s not quite right. The truth is the other way around.

The Southern Kingdoms have *their* name because they sit to the south of the Greatwood, as if the continent’s main purpose was to have a place for the Greatwood to exist. This made the humans living on this land nothing more than land-monkeys with nothing to offer the Greatwood, living on the comparatively barren earth. The vast woods made up roughly half the surface of the continent.

The thick growth of enchanted trees was home to terribly powerful magical beasts, preventing the people in the south from crossing over to the kingdoms to the north. In fact, it didn’t simply hinder human travel; at times, the forest grew and encroached into human territory, eating away at the habitable land.

The people did their best to fight back against the fickle woods when it spread, and lived as well as they could in the land left over. They raised children, built communities—and went to war with one another.

Such was the relationship between the Greatwood and humanity. Frontier settlements existed along its edges, humankind’s first line of defense against the trees. They cut their way through the forest. Sometimes, it was all they could do to fell the trees that crossed into human territory. These were dangerous areas, where encountering a magical beast was not uncommon. On the other hand, feudal lords granted settlers the right to own any land they cleared or successfully defended. The privilege extended to all: commoners, refugees, and immigrants alike. Even despite these methods, the lords were still constantly at war with the Greatwood.

Oddly enough, every nation and territory eventually adopted the same tradition. Characters with shady pasts naturally gathered in the settlements along the forest: peddlers of get-rich-quick schemes, debtors, fugitives, ex-convicts, criminals, former mercenaries, and failed would-be adventurers.

Northplain was a territory within the kingdom of Igris, one of the regions bordering on the Greatwood. It was one such settlement, far off in one of the northern corners of human territory at the very edge of the Greatwood.

“Was.” After being swallowed up by the Greatwood, the settlement no longer existed.

After Gaius Beldarus resigned from his post and renounced his title, he departed the capital and returned to his hometown to visit his mother's grave.

★

"It's as grim as I expected," Gaius sighed to himself, seeing the ruins of his former home before his eyes.

The fields that the villagers had worked so hard to carve out were now completely enveloped by the Greatwood. The forest, which should have been a distant sight from across those fields, had expanded its territory into the plaza, the former heart of the village. If Gaius wanted to reach the home he had once shared with his mother, he would need to descend from his cart and weave his way through the trees on foot for some time.

While several houses survived the invasion, it had been a rough 30 years and the buildings were all in the process of crumbling into the ground. It may go without saying, but there wasn't a single habitable structure left in the village.

From what he'd heard along his journey, no new frontier settlements had been created in the surrounding area. Nor could he find any trace that a person had been here recently. It was clear that the land's rulers, House Zigan, had given up entirely on preserving the existing settlements, let alone securing the borderlands. Rumor had it that family strife had caused their grip on the area to loosen in recent years.

With another sigh, Gaius descended from his wagon and slowly began walking.

★

Gaius could feel his love for antiques slipping a notch as he looked about the ruins of his hometown. He collected the ashes and belongings of his mother and her neighbors, thinking it fortunate that he'd built a burial mound to mark a grave for his mother. He needed to consider what his next move would be, however.

Gaius still had a decent amount of money saved from his days as captain of the guard; a nearby settlement might allow him to join them. Perhaps he would make a new home in the nearest town. He could take up work as a carpenter or laborer, and eventually build himself a modest house.

But where on earth would I build...? An open, flat parcel of land would be best, one not too far yet not too close to a source of water. Gaius thought deeply and rubbed his chin.

Ah yes, there's a river just outside the village. Remembering this,

Gaius decided to go and see what state it was in.

It had entirely dried up. Gaius didn't know what had happened in the thirty-some years since he'd swam and played in the river, but now all that was left was a stretch of sandy soil in the shape of a riverbed.

He looked "upstream," but there was no sign of what had caused this. All he could see was the riverbed stretching into the forest like a road.

The Greatwood was devouring the village, so why had the riverbed been left untouched by the greedy trees? And just how long ago had the water dried up? Had the river changed direction, or had its source also run dry? All sorts of questions came to mind.

Come to think of it, I never did go upstream back in the day. The reason for this was obvious; no settler would ever let a child go into the Greatwood.

...I suppose there's nothing to be done about the river, but what should I do now? Digging a well would be laborious and costly, but he couldn't survive relying solely on rainfall, either. Settling down here seemed more and more complicated by the minute. Logically speaking, the further one lived from a town, the more difficult it would be to secure food.

Gaius scratched his chin with thick fingers, faced once again with his own thoughtlessness. His top priority had been to get as far away from the capital as he could, so his homecoming was quite unplanned. In fact, he'd been warned against leaping before he looked many, many times—by the former king, the princess, his upperclassmen and subordinates. But, as the saying goes, old habits die hard.

"You completely lack foresight, so you'd do well to heed the advice of those under your command," the king had once advised him.

"Do you have more muscles where your brains should be, dear?" The princess, who had at one point been his wife, used to tease him.

A knight who had once stayed in Gaius's home had always chided him with "Sir Gaius, you are a reckless one, without a doubt."

Despite all this, Gaius had enjoyed his days as the princess's guard, and his time as just another knight. He hadn't wanted it all to end. But ever since he'd been given a station he was unqualified for—and especially since the current king had taken the throne—Gaius had been drawn into political bickering and personal bodyguard duties. His head and stomach had ached more and more each day.

In his own way, he really had taken care not to do or say anything out of line. But the freeloading knight living with him gave him advice to do just the opposite: "Sir Gaius, you ought to be more selfish! Live life as you want to live it!" At that, he truly felt he never should have taken on a title.

As Gaius heaved a sigh and sat back down in his wagon—

“Eeeeyaaahhh!” he heard a shrill voice cry out.

A woman’s scream...? No, a child’s?! Gaius stood up in a flash, his hands already seeking out a weapon from inside the wagon, a thick, cleaver-like sword known as a faussar. He scanned his surroundings to try and find from where the voice had come. It had been close, but it was difficult to discern the source of the scream.

He took a deep, sharp breath and shouted, “Where are you?!” in a booming voice. Straining his ears, he made out the sound of startled birds taking flight before the same voice called out once again. “Uwaaah!”

It had come from his left, deeper in the woods. Gaius took off as soon as he determined the direction of the sound, his massive frame hurtling forward with ferocious speed.

Who, or what, could be over there? What kind of situation was he charging into? He moved without thinking, as though forgetting the way he had cursed his own lack of forethought just a moment ago. Gaius heard screams, and so he ran. That was all the reason he needed.

If his former subordinates could see him now, their response would no doubt be a snide “He’s hopeless, that man.” Snide, but with a hint of pride.

That’s the sort of man Gaius Beldarus was.

★

He plunged into the forest, racing toward the voice he’d heard. As he ran, weaving through the foliage like a rolling boulder, something came into view:

The back of a beast. A beast standing upright, at least eight feet tall.

The gigantic creature reared back on two hind legs, spreading four forelegs wide. Gaius had seen its like before. It was a bugbear, one of the many magical beasts that roamed the woods. Just as the name implied, it had six legs like an insect and hatched from an egg.

Even an ordinary bear was far too much of a threat for a lone human. One blow from those arms with their knifelike claws would instantly turn a man into mincemeat. Its thick fur and flesh provided a natural armor.

But bears, wary creatures by nature, didn’t generally go after humans. When people and bears crossed paths, it was typically an unfortunate coincidence, or when a bear had developed a taste for human flesh.

Bugbears, however, were different. They did hunt humans. Perhaps they had lost that sense of caution, but just as bears would

reach into a beehive for honey, bugbears would attack human habitats. Ones just like the frontier village where Gaius had grown up.

“Oi!” Gaius bellowed. He traded away the element of surprise in an attempt to draw the bugbear’s attention away from the child.

He quickly took in his surroundings, but he couldn’t see a child anywhere. Maybe they were hiding behind a tree...or maybe he was too late, and they already lay dead or dying somewhere. The search would have to wait until he dealt with the threat before him. He raised his sword over his head with both hands in an advanced sword-wielding posture called the “roof stance.”

“Grrr...” The beast turned slowly toward him in response to his voice. The beast’s center of gravity was unstable while it stood on just its two hind legs, and it was unable to change its direction easily. For a moment, it lowered itself onto all six legs to turn towards Gaius, growling menacingly.

It began its fierce charge.

★

The monster trembled in delight at discovering the source of the noise. To think that it would meet a “land-monkey” here, of all places... And here it had just been thinking that the prey it had cornered would be too small for a meal. Land-monkeys. They were a rare sight in the forest, so sometimes it would go looking for them. They were slow. Weak. Easy meals.

Sometimes they would have shells, but that only made them a little less easy to eat. And the meat inside would still be just as soft.

The bugbear had eaten a land-monkey like that two autumns ago. The land-monkey had hit it on the head with a stick, but that was all. The stick had barely hurt, and all the bugbear had had to do was run into it to send the land-monkey flying. After that, all it had done was pet the land-monkey with its front paws until it stopped moving.

This new land-monkey wanted to hit it, too.

Stupid land-monkeys. That stupid stick won’t even—

★

—before it could even finish its thought, its skull was dashed to pieces.

When the bugbear charged, Gaius rushed forward as well, even faster than the monster. The bugbear ran low to the ground, and Gaius’s height advantage added to the force of his blow.

With his towering height and the great strength behind that heavy blade, Gaius’s downward swing was as devastating as the namesake of his roof stance: “like a roof falling on your head.” The violent blow

smashed the creature's skull, crushing its brains and cutting short whatever thoughts it might have had.

The rest of the bugbear's body pitched forward and collapsed. As Gaius slashed, he'd swiftly dodged to the side at the same time to avoid the massive beast's charge.

Its body crashed into a tree with a great **thud!** Gaius quickly approached it and brought his sword down on its head three more times. By then, its head was severed from its neck and its skull smashed to a pulp, bits of brain scattered all around.

Larger monsters, especially magical ones, were able to survive far more damage than humans. Best to make sure you've finished the job. Gaius had learned that from his mother, who had lived and died as one of the settlement's warriors.

Gaius shook the blood and gore from his faussar and glanced around. Once he'd made sure no other threats remained, he let out a breath.

I was right to bring this blade. The faussar had a blade that curved backward, reminiscent of a sickle. It was only double-edged near the tip, where a series of notches resembling a steep mountain range had been made. The design was meant to allow the wielder to let the sword's weight to do all the work, or to slash in a way that sunk those thorns into its target. It was also good at cutting down horses by aiming for their legs.

Gaius had a heavier, thicker version of that style of sword, made to suit his massive frame. Without such a weapon, he wouldn't have been able to pull off that earlier move. Though it looked unwieldy, it allowed him to make good use of his strength. It also fit his personality quite well; wielding it required some recklessness, and it was tough to break.

"It's all right now." Gaius called out to the unseen other person, looking all around himself as he spoke. He looked in every direction, but there was no reply, nor any sign of a child.

It made him sick to think they could already be lying somewhere, lifeless.

This was bad. They might not be able to respond. Gaius searched the trees nearby to see if anyone had collapsed behind one. "Not here... Not here, either..." he muttered under his breath. Just then, he heard a growl. His body reacted before he even decided to move, and instantly he was pointing his blade at a potential target. That target was...

...a dog? Yes. A white dog stood before him. Or perhaps it was a wolf, but judging from its size, a dog seemed more likely. In any case, it was doglike. The creature leaned against a tree trunk, baring its fangs at Gaius.

...Dogs had always hated him. Back in the capital, they had barked and growled at him whenever he passed by. In fact, he'd never had a dog take a liking to him after he reached adulthood, not even once.

No matter how much he wanted to pet them, to feel their fur, for some reason they all seemed to run or panic when he got near. Once, one had even lost control of its bladder and fainted. Gaius had fallen into a deep depression for days after that incident. So he accepted this dog's reaction as an unavoidable event.

What really bothered him was the wound on its leg, and the fact that it was wearing animal-skin clothing. Surely wild dogs and wolves didn't wear clothes, which meant this one had to belong to someone, and so its owner couldn't be far.

If the dog's owner couldn't reply to him, they must have been in serious trouble. He needed to find them, and soon. Taking a chance on the hope that this dog might be able to lead him there, Gaius steeled himself, mustered the sweetest voice he could, and gently called out to it.

"I-I-It's all right. Wh-Where's your owner? Are they close?" A dog couldn't possibly understand the words of someone besides its owner, but at the very least it might flee in the direction of the missing person. Gaius knelt down and tilted his head while smiling awkwardly. The dog continued to snarl at him.

"It doesn't matter how I ask it. It's still just a dog," Gaius mumbled, his head and shoulders slumping in disappointment. Could he find the owner in time? He had to hurry.

When he lifted his head back up, Gaius heard an unexpected voice answer him.

"I'm no dog!" Dumbfounded, Gaius's jaw dropped.

The white dog continued, "I'm a kobold warrior, and I have a name! It's Fog! Don't treat me like some mutt!" The dog...could speak?! Gaius spun around, but there was no one else there. So this must have been the source of the scream he had heard.

"Ya hear me, troll?!" Trolls were a powerful humanoid race that could grow up to three meters tall. They were a simple folk who lived in the mountains and at the outskirts of the Greatwood, farming and foresting. They were a rare sight in the southern kingdoms, as most of them lived to the east and west. While they had little contact with Igris and its neighbors, they did interact with humans, so their existence was a well-known fact.

Ogres were muscular and violent. Elves were long-lived. Orcs were gallant, while halflings were small and charming. Dwarves were known for being heroic and lusty. And trolls were huge and immensely strong.

This wasn't the first time he had been called a troll—and sometimes it wasn't an accident.

Even so, to be scolded by a dog—well, no, it just said itself that it wasn't a dog.

Its mouth and tongue were clearly not human, nor did they look well-suited to speaking. They were definitely beastlike. It was amazing to think it was even capable of human language. And yet, it actually spoke even more properly than a lot of humans. That much Gaius could tell when he heard it.

“Oh, I...I apologize. I was out of line.” Gaius fumbled through an apology as he regained his senses.

After an awkward silence, he heard that voice again.

“Ah, I was kinda harsh. I was all worked up... I'm sorry, too. Ya just saved me, and here I am insulting you.”

“I heard a scream.” It had to have come from this kobold. He might have mistaken Fog's voice for a child's because of her small size, or because the perilous situation caused her to cry out in her real voice. But whatever the reason, Gaius thought, that didn't matter now. He was simply grateful her voice had carried so far. He might never have heard her otherwise.

“Really though, you saved my life. A second more and that thing would've had me for a snack.” This time, she bowed her head low. Flustered, Gaius waved his arms, urging her to lift her head.

“Let's try this again. I'm White Fog, a kobold warrior. And you are?”

“My name is Gaius. I come from that nearby village.” Gaius pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

“Village? You mean those ruins?”

“I was born there. It was still a village when I was a child.”

“What on earth happened?”

“Magic beasts. Long ago, it was attacked by a pack of bugbears, like, the beast that attacked you. I've lived elsewhere since then.”

“Hmm...so you lost your village, too...”

“You could say that.”

“...You're just like us.” Gaius tilted his head and opened his mouth to ask what she meant, but a sudden groan from Fog cut him off.

“Does it hurt?”

“It's nothing major.” Fog put up a brave front, but the wound she was pressing down on looked fairly deep. Fog tried to stand, as if to demonstrate that she was all right, but her face twisted in pain and she had to sit back down.

“Just a scratch. I only need a little break and I'll be good to go.”

“Your face says otherwise.” Gaius placed his hands around her chest and picked her up, gently wrapping his right arm around her

while holding his sword in his left hand.

“Hey, hey, hey! What are you doing?!”

“You can’t walk on that leg. Don’t force it. I’ll take you home.”

“No, I mean watch where you’re touching, you perv!”

“Oh! S-Sorry...” Gaius hurriedly tried to figure out a more proper way to carry her, but he was at a loss.

Seeing his distress, Fog sighed deeply. “It’s fine, don’t worry.” She cleared her throat. “If we stick around too long, we’ll get eaten by some other monster. I won’t give you a hard time. You seem like an alright guy.”

“I appreciate the kind words,” Gaius laughed. It was rare for anyone—human or animal—not to treat him like a scoundrel from the moment they saw him, so he was quite pleased.

“I can tell from your smell. Sort of, anyway.”

“My smell?” She seemed even more doglike now, not that Gaius would have said that aloud.

“Yeah, your spirit’s smell.” The corners of her mouth pulled back in what looked like a smile.

“Anyhow, I don’t feel like dying here. I’ve got little ones waiting for me.”

★

As Gaius tended to Fog’s injury in the wagon, her eyes widened and she blurted out, “That pile of dirt’s moving! You have some real strange stuff.” She stared at the earth-colored object tied to the wagon. It had two black hollows for eyes, and its features were simple and expressionless. It was a golem horse, made of mud.

“That’s right. That’s my dear steed, Claudette.” When it heard its name being said, the golem neighed softly in response. “She doesn’t need to eat or drink, and if she gets injured I can patch her up with soil. After a bit she’s as good as new. She really is a wonder.”

“Sounds like there’s lots of handy stuff outside the forest.”

“There is indeed.”

“Me, I’m awful at taking care of living things.”

“Hmm...” This was suddenly familiar. Back when he had been a knight, Gaius had struggled to keep from startling any horse he was given. The princess, unable to simply stand by and watch this continue, asked the king to request a golem horse from the eastern kingdoms. The golem had become his steadfast companion on both official and private business, diligently supporting him while enduring his clumsy, rough handling. The princess had also seen to its name when she gifted it to him.

“All done.” He’d washed the injury and applied a salve to stanch the bleeding, then wrapped a bandage around her leg. He retrieved a

bottle of pain medicine and took out what seemed like a proper dose for someone of Fog's size, then handed it to her.

"I can give you more proper treatment once we've returned, if you'd like."

"Ugh, this stuff is bitter...and, thanks."

"Now then, which direction should I take?"

"You saw that dried-up river, right? Follow that and it'll take you just outside the village." Gaius recalled the riverbed he'd seen a moment ago.

"Will the wagon be alright? The wheels could get stuck if we drive through mud."

"It's all sand. You shouldn't have any problems."

"Is that so? Then we should manage." Gaius flicked the reins and directed his beloved steed to go back the way they'd come.

As it turned out, there was no danger of getting mired in a bog or stuck in the sand. Claudette's footing was solid, and she pulled the wagon along with considerable strength. The wheels rolled smoothly, and the three proceeded into the forest.

If one could put up with the bumpy ride, then traveling by a golem-drawn cart was vastly superior to a real horse, as they needed no food, or drink, or rest. According to Fog, they were still a good distance away from the village, so Gaius picked up the pace. Fortunately for them, the riverbed was good and flat.

"I'd read once that kobolds were a small, humanoid race related to goblins. I never imagined you'd look so..."

"So'?"

Gaius had been about to say "doglike," but caught himself. "...Fluffy," he finished instead.

"Yeah? Well, we used to have contact with goblins, back in the day. But I dunno, that description sounds really off... Maybe the elder knows something about that." The book Gaius referred to was an illustrated monster encyclopedia he'd read in the castle library.

To lump goblins and kobolds together as monsters, when he was able to talk and sympathize with one... Gaius felt embarrassed at the arrogance of humanity, himself included. But it was also natural. In the southern kingdoms, there were few races with intelligence, in other words, "people," aside from humans. Even elves, said to be the most populous race on the continent, were a rare sight there. As a result, humans lived in ignorance about other races, and could be exclusionary, even outright discriminatory, to others, especially those that looked less human. Few humans in the south would consider them people. And so, kobolds came to be recorded as a variety of monster.

Gaius, on the other hand, was decidedly different from most

southerners, most likely because of his upbringing. Naturally, it had made him more open-minded.

Gaius suddenly noticed the silence, and turned around to see that Fog had fallen asleep. Drowsiness was one of the side effects of the pain medicine he'd given her, and the effect may have been stronger in kobolds, who likely weren't used to such medicine.

Fog had said that if he followed the river, he would see the village. That meant there would be no harm in letting her sleep until they arrived. Gaius drove on through the woods, keeping an eye out for any more dangers.

He was concerned about whether Fog's children would fear him. Whether they did or not, he was sure they would be adorable, and busied himself with imagining their hypothetical cuteness.

★

They drove on and on for quite some time. The trees to either side began to gradually thin out, and there, in the middle of the forest, he saw a sprawling grassland. Trees still grew here and there, but even so, it was hard to imagine that such a wide open space could be hidden in the heart of the Greatwood. The riverbed continued along the edge of the field for a stretch, before ending at the foot of a small hill. The woods beyond weren't unremarkable by any means, but something in the center of the plain caught Gaius's attention.

A village was there. He could see a few dozen small homes built from twigs and grass. Columns of smoke billowed up here and there, visible even in the distance, and the hamlet lay between two small, craggy mountains that towered over it, as though they were symbols of the village.

"That must be it," Gaius said to himself, and reached into the back to shake Fog awake.

"Nn... Can't believe I fell asleep... Yep, that's it. That there's the village."

"What a darling village!" The homes were smaller and simpler than human houses, but even so, the sight calmed him.

The villagers must be as small and precious as their homes. And unlike animals or human children... If, like Fog, the kobold children weren't afraid of him...

...Then, perhaps they might allow me to pet them. The thought brought a smile to his face. To someone who didn't know him, his expression was like that of a ferocious beast, baring its fangs before its prey.

Behind him, Fog muttered darkly. "Well, we had to rebuild everything in a hurry. It's the best we could do."

The cart soon reached a row of houses, and—

“Stop right there!” a voice shouted. Suddenly, kobolds wielding stone spears and axes closed around the wagon from all sides. Every one of them was growling, their noses wrinkled in snarls.

Gaius slowly lifted his hands from the reins and gave them a smile, trying to show that he didn’t mean any harm. His smile was partially a show of friendship, and partially because his heart was dancing at the sight of so many fluffy kobolds gathered in one place. Of course, a smile from Gaius never really looked that friendly in the best of circumstances.

“Why have you come here?!”

“My name is Gaius. I’ve only come to bring one of your injured villagers home. I bear you no ill will.” As Gaius said this, Fog popped her face up beside him from the back of the wagon. She barked at the armed villagers.

“Cut it out, he’s telling the truth! This troll saved me from a bear!” The kobolds turned to one another and began to argue among themselves. Eventually, they lowered their weapons.

“Is that right?”

“I guess it must be, if Fog says so.”

“Yeah, and if we argue with her, she’ll hit us.”

“I’ve never seen a troll before.”

“Me either, me either.”

“Hey, what’s this mud monster?” As they turned to each other and began talking noisily, the tension in the air dissipated. Gaius watched the cute sight, his eyes crinkling with delight.

Ah, what a wonderful scene. Just this makes leaving the capital worth it. I hope they’ll allow me to stay for a little while, so I can remember this sight forever... Although I suppose that would be selfish of me. ...Ah, but if I settled down in the ruins of my village, it would be a simple enough matter to stop by every once in a while. If he did that, he could lay his mother and the villagers to rest while also being able to visit the kobolds. It wouldn’t be the most convenient life, but there were a lot of merits to living there. He’d need to dip into his savings, but perhaps he’d try digging a well after all. Maybe he could try to build a home there. Surely that was the best thing for him to do, right?! That must be it!

Gaius was lost in thought as Fog descended from the wagon.

“Make way, make way! I’ve gotta give a warm welcome to the guy that saved my life. Over here, Gaius. It’s getting dark already, so come stay over at my place.” She began leading the way, dragging her left leg. Gaius gave the golem the command to stop and tried to follow

her, when—

“What do you think you’re doing, Fog?! You’ve led a human right to us!” Gaius immediately stopped when he heard those harsh, spiteful words.

“Elder,” Fog said, turning around. When Gaius turned in the same direction, he saw a kobold leaning on a walking stick.

As a human, Gaius did not know what an old kobold looked like, but from the faded fur, cloudy eyes, and his slightly shaky gait, it was clear that he was looking at one.

“Fog, why have you brought one of them here?”

“Why? Didn’t I just say? I got attacked by a six-legged bear and he saved my life. I was this close to getting eaten alive.”

“Even so, to bring a human right to our village...!”

“Huh?” Fog turned to look at Gaius. She then turned back to the village elder and said, “What are you talking about, you damn stupid stank-breathed old fool?! Humans don’t get that big, now do they? I’m telling you, he’s a troll. A tro-oll. And besides, look. Even his hair is grey. Don’t trolls have grey hair?”

“So do humans! Trolls have dark grey skin! And male trolls don’t even grow hair, only the women do. You haven’t even seen a troll before, have you?” There was silence.

“...Is that true?” Slowly, nervously, Fog looked over at Gaius.

“So I hear.”

“...You’re not a troll?”

“In a sense. My mother was half troll.”

“And what was the other half?”

“Human, I suppose.” The atmosphere changed in an instant. A clamor broke out among the kobolds, and they hurriedly picked their weapons back up. Seeing this, Fog heaved a deep sigh and pressed a hand to her forehead.

“Why didn’t you say something sooner...?”

“Er, well. I’ve been mistaken for one before. And as I said, I am a quarter troll. It can’t be that big an issue.”

“It’s a huge problem, you idiot!” She gave another heavy sigh.

“Do you see what you’ve done, Fog?! I told you he was human!”

“Okay, I was wrong, Elder.”

“...And on top of that, you insulted me something fierce just now, didn’t you?” Fog didn’t reply other than to wave a hand dismissively. Dragging her injured leg, she left them and headed for the cluster of houses.

The village elder watched her leave before turning back to Gaius.

“Tie him up!” He ordered the villagers surrounding Gaius. All at once, the kobolds rushed forward and piled onto him.

As the soft, fluffy kobolds swarmed over him, pushing him down

and leaning their weight against him, Gaius sat down and bent forward so that they could restrain him more easily, holding out both hands.

“Wahahahaha!” Gaius cheered with joy and put up no resistance as they tied his binds.

★

After he'd had his fill of being buried in fur, Gaius allowed himself to be led into a building slightly larger than the other dwellings. Its roof was low, however, and even when he crawled in on his hands and knees, he could only barely fit through the entrance. The earth inside had been dug out, which made the room a little more spacious, but with Gaius's massive build, it would still be an exceptionally tight fit. Apparently, this was originally a storehouse, which the villagers had hurriedly prepared to hold their new captive.

“Get in there, human!” They pushed Gaius inside, prodding him with spears and axes. Once inside, they bound his ankles together and tied his arms against his body with several loops of rope.

“And keep it down, you *human!*” With that, they all left, though it seemed someone was still at the entrance. A guard, perhaps.

“Well, now, what do I do about this?” Gaius said to himself, adjusting his body to get more comfortable in his simple jail.

The question that troubled him the most was why kobolds loathed humans so much. It did not appear that they mistrusted all other races on principle, since they seemed to harbor no negative feelings toward trolls. So whatever had happened, it must have been between kobolds and humans, perhaps even just these kobolds in particular.

He wondered if the kobolds had had some kind of quarrel with a nearby village, but that made little sense. The Greatwood was vast enough to house many villages, so there should be no reason for kobold and human interests to conflict. The settlers' primary concern was fighting to maintain their borders against the incessant growth of trees. Even under perfect conditions—and they were far from perfect—it would take human settlers years to clear enough woodland to reach kobold territory.

For one thing, they had their hands full dealing with the forest's ever-hungry trees and magical beasts. Even if they considered kobolds to be monsters, they could hardly afford to waste energy fighting with a group they could communicate with. Though they were ignorant of other races, the settlers were still rationalists, products of their harsh environment.

Then what? Grumbling and groaning, Gaius couldn't make sense of it. He tried posing the question to the guard, but all he got in response was “Shut it, human!”

Without any answers, all Gaius could do was continue to wonder.

★

The sound of the guard talking with someone reached Gaius.

“All right, my turn now.”

“What about your kids?”

“It’s fine, my neighbor’s keeping an eye on them.” After a brief pause, a white kobold entered the hut, holding a clay pot on a tray. It was White Fog.

“Brought you some dinner.” She set the tray with the stew pot down in front of Gaius, before walking around him and untying the ropes at his back.

“I appreciate it.” Gaius rubbed at his wrists where the ropes had left marks. In response to his gratitude, Fog gave a small smile. “No reason to thank me.”

“Go on, then, eat up before it goes cold. We didn’t drain the blood from the meat as quick as we usually do, though, so it smells pretty awful. Probably tastes that way, too.”

“I’m grateful for anything that will fill my empty stomach. What kind of meat is it?”

“It’s from the bear you took down. The men went back for its meat. Wouldn’t want all that going to waste, would we?”

“Ah, I see.” Gaius stirred the soup, staring down at the floating chunks of meat. Eventually, he steeled himself, picked up the wooden spoon, and brought it up to his mouth. Once he tasted it, he found it tasted like ordinary animal meat.

He ate the rest in a hurry.

“I’ve never had bugbear before.”

“Haha, we don’t eat it too often here. Those six-legged bears are brutal, and powerful too. Hey, sorry about what happened earlier,” she added as she began to gather up the dishes.

“No, the fault was mine. I didn’t explain myself properly.”

“Give me a break, that’s not true.” She laughed bitterly, which made Gaius smile slightly, too.

“I have a question, Fog.”

“What’s that?”

“Why are humans so despised here?”

Fog’s face clouded over, and she froze. She took a deep breath and looked Gaius in the eye. Slowly, she sat down in front of him and began to speak.

“You saw our houses around here, right?”

“Indeed. They’re so small and adorable!”

“That’s not what I mean. They’re a right mess, all of them. They’re barely held together. They’re not gonna last the winter, no way. Some

village. And you know why?" Gaius cocked his head. Only bad reasons came to mind.

"Our last village, where we used to live, got attacked by you humans. You kicked us out."

★

It had been toward the end of winter. Suddenly, a band of humans arrived.

Without any warning, several of them drew their swords, readied their bows, and prepared to cast spells. They laid waste to the village and slaughtered kobolds. Men and women. The elderly, adults, and children. Indiscriminately.

The village warriors took up their own weapons, but they were no match for the size and strength of the humans. Or their combat technology, or their equipment. Most of the kobold warriors fell, and for those who managed to survive, it was all they could do to escape.

One-third of the village was killed, and another third went missing as they fled. All they wanted was to survive, but the Greatwood is not a kind land. By now, they've most likely fallen to hunger or the cold, or else became food for magical beasts.

Fog, who was pregnant at the time, managed to escape with the others, and after some wandering, they arrived at this area.

Her husband had stayed behind with the other soldiers, though, and fought the humans. To buy them time.

And he never returned to his wife's side.

★

The sun began to rise while Fog told her story. The only light within the hut came from outside.

"My husband was a great potter, but a real dummy. He was no soldier, but still went and...oh, brother! Are you crying?!" Gaius replied with a snuffle.

"Come on, what are you crying for?" With a wry smile, Fog picked up the tray and stood up. "There you have it. That's why they all hate humans. I don't like that they're doing all this to the guy who saved my life, but you understand why, right?"

There was the sound of Gaius blowing his nose loudly.

He nodded, wiping at his nose with a cloth he'd pulled out of his breast pocket.

"So can you keep quiet about this place? You know, when you leave the forest."

"Of course."

"Thanks." Fog chuckled and smiled, then headed for the entrance.

“Well, that’s the way it is. We didn’t have much time to build this place, so we’re always low on supplies. We need all the firewood we can get, so everyone goes to bed early once it gets dark.”

“I see.”

“I’m beat, too. I’ll probably fall asleep as soon as I put these dishes away.”

“Uh-huh.”

“All right then. Goodbye, Gaius. I’m really, really grateful you saved me.” She looked back at him one more time, then left.

Fog did not return that night.

★

The next morning, Gaius greeted Fog with a smile as she stood at the entrance frozen, a dumbfounded look on her face.

“Good morning! You’re quite careless as a guard. You forgot to tie me up again when you left! Hahaha!”

“Wha-wha-wha-wha-wha—”

“What?”

“What the hell are you still doing here?! Why didn’t you run for it?!”

Gaius cocked his head.

“Why do you think I sent the guard away and untied you?!”

“Huh?! So you didn’t forget to tie me up?!”

Had Gaius not been sitting on the floor against the wall, he would have fallen over in surprise.

Seeing his reaction, Fog clapped a hand to her forehead and sighed heavily.

There was a brief awkward pause.

“I, er...that is...I am sorry,” he managed clumsily, scratching his head.

...Gaius Beldarus was quite slow on the uptake.

Chapter 2: Gaius

“I can’t let you out in broad daylight, or else it’ll cause a big fuss. So just behave yourself and tonight I’ll untie you again. You’ve got to wait until then! Got it?!”

“I understand.” Gaius nodded obediently. Fog tied him up once more, then left the hut.

The difference between the darkness inside and the brightness outside made her squint. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and it looked like there would be no need to worry about rain today. “All right then,” she said to herself as she took a look around.

She turned to the west and saw the two small, rocky mountains at the edge of the plain. The mountains basked in the sunlight, showing off their craggy skin—not only were they a pleasing sight to the kobolds’ eyes when they’d discovered this place, but they’d become something of a symbol of the village as a whole.

Next, she looked to the north. If you continued a long, *long* way in that direction, you would reach the heart of the Greatwood. Mountains loomed in the distance. Some were sharp and craggy, others blanketed in greenery. A mountain known as the Great Anvil sat in the heart of the forest, but it wasn’t visible from the village.

Of course, Fog had never gone that far into the woods. She only knew the name from the village elder’s stories. If someone went out there, they’d certainly become food for much larger, stronger magical beasts than bugbears or tree-eating lizards.

As one went deeper into the woods, the trees became strangely tall and sinister. It made Fog realize once again that the place they all lived in was only the barest edges of the Greatwood.

The kobolds could never survive in the depths of the Greatwood. That being said, there was nowhere for them to go outside the forest, either. The only place they could exist was here, this place that was neither inside nor outside.

We’ve gotten pretty used to this sight by now, Fog thought to herself as she made her way to the village square, leaning on a cane to compensate for her injured leg.

She was soon stopped by an older kobold calling her name. “What do you want, Elder? I’ve got places to be.”

“Fog, when are you going to kill that human?” the village elder asked, looking over to the storehouse with eyes filled with hatred.

“...I was just thinking about how to finish him off, so you can shut it already.” Fog glared at him, hoping to stop any further questioning along these lines. “You’re not even our chief or anything. I’m the one who caught him, and I’m the one who brought him here. At least let me decide what I’m going to do about him.”

The village currently had no leader; the previous chieftain had been killed in the human invasion. Ever since then, they’d survived by combining their strengths to come to one another’s aid rather than deciding on a new leader. Perhaps they felt hesitant to elect someone new, and in doing so say farewell to their old village, lives, friends, and families.

They called this kobold “Elder” because he was the oldest of the survivors, and out of respect for his position as the strongest shaman in the village, but he was not a real leader.

“Even so, Fog—”

“I’ll convince the others. And if they don’t listen, I’ll beat them up until they do. You think anyone in the village is stronger than me?” She bared her fangs in a grin.

“*Caught him*”? He brought you along with him. You even thought he was a troll.” Fog’s irrational argument failed to sway him.

“Shut it already, gramps! Don’t sweat the small stuff! That’s why your farts stink just like your breath!”

“Wha—Everyone’s farts stink!”

“Excuse you! Mine smell fine!” This time, she bared her fangs threateningly. She growled at him for a while, before turning away with a *hmph!* and walking off, leaving the elder behind. He continued blathering on about something or other as she left, but she ignored him.

However, Fog did have to concede to herself that the elder did have a point.

Fog herself had lost her husband at the hands of humans. Not just him...her family, her friends, her neighbors. She’d lost so many. If the village hadn’t been attacked, many of their children would still be alive. She understood how the elder felt.

And yet, despite that, Fog didn’t see Gaius in the same light as the humans that had attacked them.

It wasn’t just because he saved her, or because he had troll blood.

The elder, everyone in the village...any kobold should understand. Yes, they should understand. They should understand, and yet...

Will I have enough time? It looked like Fog would have to let Gaius escape while keeping everyone, especially the village elder, distracted. Fog thought about all this, and as she clumsily limped along on the still-unfamiliar cane, she considered plans to let Gaius escape that night.

A group of kobolds had gathered in the village square, where a pair of deer carcasses had been laid in the center.

The kobolds, who only knew life at the fringes of the forest, didn't realize that deer weren't a native species—they typically lived outside of the Greatwood. Magical beasts and enchanted trees dominated the further you went into the woods, but in this area, so close to the edge, plants and animals would crossbreed with outside species.

“Yo, Fog!”

“Morning, Rain Grass.”

Rain Grass was around the same age as Fog. He had been given his name during his early childhood—whenever he got caught in the rain, he wouldn't even attempt to dry himself off. His parents had decided that his wet fur looked like rain-drenched grass.

Kobolds often named their children in their infancy after their physical traits, behavior, or personalities. One only had to look at White Fog to see why she had been given her name. As a child, she used to sulk over not having a more imaginative name she liked better, but ironically enough, she ended up giving her own child a traditional name as well.

“What's the news on that human?”

“He's been behaving himself ever since yesterday. I got someone else to take over watching him...but forget about that. This is a great haul for so early in the morning. Isn't this amazing?” she asked Rain Grass, dodging the subject.

“Yep. Fell right into the traps we set yesterday.”

Fog nodded emphatically. “Then no one has to go out hunting today, huh?”

“We're going to go cut some trees down instead.”

“Ah, right. That needs to be taken care of.” Fog agreed, considering the current state of village housing.

The village's houses were all makeshift and crude, having been built hurriedly, and there weren't enough to go around. This meant that, depending on the size of the home, several families had to crowd into one dwelling. This was their first summer in this place, so although they'd managed to get by, winter was not that far off. Building proper homes was their second-most important task, right behind acquiring food.

At present, most of the kobolds' houses were tent-like structures made from thin trees and branches. The next step would be to cut trees into support pillars, build frames from them, and turn the tents into pit-style dwellings. That would allow them to endure the wind, snow, and cold.

“You don’t have to come, not on that leg. You wouldn’t get very far if some magical beasts showed up.”

“I’d feel bad, though...”

“You’d feel even worse if you pushed your luck too far and died on us. And then we’d all be in a real bind.”

This was certainly a critical time for them. The survivors had to survive long enough to begin cultivating fields, hunting for food, and rebuilding their homes. They also needed to have children, and raise them. After all, the village was still down to one-third of its previous population. Losing any more could mean life or death for the rest of the village.

“We need every last bit of help we can get.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” Fog slowly nodded, a glum expression on her face.

★

There was a tree native to the Greatwood called the black shina. It was unusual in that its wood was pitch-black all the way through to its core. Naturally, so was its bark. As lumber, it was too brittle to be of much use for building, but its bark was traditionally sought after by kobolds. They made thread from it by finely shaving the bark’s fibers, drying them, then twisting them together. Unlike typical tree bark, they didn’t treat it by boiling or soaking it in water, because the kobolds were after a very special substance contained within the bark. That substance repelled water and lasted a long time, despite being an organic material, so it made for exceptionally durable rope.

Back at her home, Fog twisted some of that material into rope. Her young son and slightly older niece were sound asleep at her side. They were the three residents of this small abode.

Fog reached a certain point in her ropemaking and said, “That’s enough of that for now,” with a big stretch. As she exhaled, she strained her ears for any strange noises, but all was well; all she heard were the sounds of earth being dug up and chatter about the day’s work not too far from her house. It seemed Gaius was quietly waiting for night to fall, which helped Fog to calm down. With one last glance over at the sleeping children, she carefully left home without making a sound.

She made her way toward the area where new houses were being constructed, walking stick in hand. Kobolds young and old alike were working together to build foundations for new homes. With the help of the forest-clearing group, they all worked together like a well-oiled machine. Having already finished digging out the pits, they’d moved onto preparing the soil that they planned to pack onto the roofs.

One of the middle-aged kobolds working there explained to Fog

that they didn't have enough of the dry, straw-like grass they would normally use; at this time of year, the stalks still contained a significant amount of moisture, so they had decided on earthen roofs instead.

"Got enough rope handy? I made some black rope if you need it."

"It looks like we're set, but we'll take some if you got it. Thanks."

"Just trying to make myself useful, since I can't do much right now. Maybe I'll head back home and make some more. I'm sure we'll need it sooner rather than later."

"Sounds like a good idea... Oh, looks like they're back from tree-chopping." Fog turned to follow his line of sight and saw the group that had ventured out into the woods making their way back to the village, carrying a log on their shoulders. They'd stripped the bark on-site, exposing the white fibers inside. Apparently they'd had to travel further into the forest than usual in order to find a good, straight tree, but fortunately, they'd gone without running into any magical beasts.

"Looks like they found a good one. That'll make some nice support. Shame we have to use green wood, though," he said, narrowing his eyes. Ideally, they would let the wood dry before using it, but with winter so close at hand, the most important thing was to have shelter from the cold. They'd have to wait until after the winter before making more permanent homes.

"Right, well, good luck." Fog handed the rope over to the middle-aged kobold, waved, and left the others to their work.

She went past the makeshift prison on her way home. Gaius was still patiently waiting there, just as she'd ordered him to. The puppy-faced young guard sat nearby, yawning periodically in boredom. Fog walked past without stopping to go inside.

When she returned home, it seemed her son had wet the bed while he and his cousin had been curled up together, asleep. The two of them were now locked in a childish brawl.

Fog sighed and smiled, even as she reached for the water jug to wash them off.

★

Gaius sat obediently in the cramped hut, as Fog had told him to, when he heard a creaking noise outside, followed by a **thud!** Then came screams of female kobolds, and shouting from the men.

"Did the supports fall?!"

"Maybe we didn't drive them in deeply enough?"

"Red Eye's son is still in there!"

"What?! We have to move these, hurry! Go get some more men!"

Though Gaius could not see the commotion outside, he could easily guess what had just happened.

He looked toward the entryway of his little jail. The young guard looked back and forth, conflicted over whether he should stay to guard the prisoner or go to help his fellows.

“What’s going on?” Gaius asked. The guard looked over at him briefly, but did not respond. He was likely under strict orders not to speak with the prisoner. Gaius tried speaking to him again, but once more received no response. All the guard did was continue panicking, his gaze flicking back and forth between the site of the accident and Gaius.

“Answer me!” The guard let out a gasp and fell backward, as though stunned by the anger in Gaius’s voice.

“A-A house collapsed, and a child is trapped under it.” The moment he heard this, a fire lit up in Gaius’s eyes.

“Why didn’t you say so sooner?!” he roared, and with a flex of his muscles, he tore through the ropes that had bound him. He crawled out of the storehouse—past the guard, who shrank away from his approach, eyes and mouth agape—and sprinted toward the commotion.

The villagers screamed even more at the sight of Gaius, but he ran past them and soon reached the collapsed house. Several kobolds were frantically scooping away at the earth beside it, attempting to get below the collapsed roof. There were few adult men; the women and children who had remained in the village were doing their best, but it was clear they were short-handed and short on strength.

He drove his hands into the wreckage and began to clear away the roof, which was made of bark, piece by piece. He pulled up the pillars, now little more than scraps of building material held together by rope, and flung them to the side. In the very next moment, he saw a small, young kobold who had been trapped beneath the fallen roof.

The child, who had black and white fur, lay motionless on his side. For a moment, Gaius feared he’d been a second too late...but when he checked and saw the child’s chest rising and falling, he sighed with relief.

“I apologize for startling you. If you’ll excuse me.” And with a quick nod, Gaius quickly walked off back in the direction of his prison cell.

...The villagers stared, dumbfounded, as he crawled back into the small storeroom. After a moment, Gaius’s face popped back up in the entryway, causing the kobolds to jump, then freeze. The air was thick with tension.

As they held their breath, Gaius slowly looked around at the crowd, and carefully opened his mouth to speak. With every single kobold’s vision trained on him, the human took a deep breath and said, “I’m, er, terribly sorry, but...I tore the rope you used to bind me.

If someone could tie me back up...?" He scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

★

"...and Fishbone got a real lump on his head, but he woke up right after that." Fishbone was the name of the child Gaius had rescued from the collapsed house.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Sheesh, you're so reckless... But thanks to you, my son's best friend is all right. So I'll let it slide that you didn't follow instructions."

"You're too kind."

Gaius quickly lowered his head in a curt bow, and Fog burst out laughing. Gaius joined in.

"Did they finish building that house afterward?"

"Yeah, some of the villagers got together and got something standing. We can worry about the details later. For now, we just need roofs over our heads, so we've got to build like crazy."

"Is that so? It sounds like difficult work."

"You're one to talk! You've got nowhere to stay. Doesn't that mean you're going to go look for somewhere to build a new home, too?"

"That's right." He laughed again. After their brief chat, Fog collected his dishes and headed for the entrance.

"Oh, yeah, by the way. No one's touched your wagon, or the stuff inside."

"I appreciate that."

She said it, which meant it must be true. Gaius believed that strongly.

"See you later, Gaius. I've got to go put the kids to bed, then 'accidentally' fall asleep myself."

"Mm-hmm. Good night, Fog."

"Night." Fog gave him a small wave. She stood up carefully so as not to put weight on her injured leg, and took her leave.

★

"...So." The next morning, Fog stood in the storeroom, pressing her fingertips to her eyebrows.

"Why aren't you trying to escape? Am I not making myself clear, Gaius? Or are you messing with me?"

Fog began to growl. Gaius held up his palms and did his best to pacify her.

"Hear me out, Fog. Come on, don't bare your fangs at me. Wait a minute. Stay. Sit." *Chomp.*

“Ow!”

“So are you going to answer me?” Fog asked, releasing her teeth from his fingers.

“I thought it over last night.”

“Thought what over? Didn’t you get any sleep?”

“No, I slept quite well.” That earned Gaius another bite. He gently pried Fog’s teeth off his arm, then set her down in front of him.

“You told me there aren’t enough homes here.”

“Hm? Yeah, but so what?”

“Would you allow me to help out?”

Fog had been scratching her neck, but she froze at the question.

“What’s with you? Are you, a *human*, feeling sorry for us?”

“No. Well...perhaps. But that’s not all. I’m not very good at explaining myself. I just want to help.”

“So, what, you want to make up for the fact that your fellow humans destroyed our home? We don’t need your pity.” Her gaze had turned into a glare.

Gaius looked her in the eye. “We may be of the same race, but I’m not one of them. I can’t atone for their crimes, nor do I intend to try.”

“So why, then?”

“How should I put this? I...no, hmm...it’s...that is...” Gaius’s eyes were closed and his arms were crossed as he hummed in thought. A moment passed, and then he lifted his head.

“Let us talk about this again when I get better at explaining myself,” he declared to Fog. She took in his words, her head tilted.

“...You’re serious about this.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, I’ve already smelled the kind of person you are. But what are you going to do about everyone else? I don’t think many of us are gonna take you up on your offer if you just go around volunteering to help.”

“I thought as much as well. What do you think of this?” And Gaius laid out his plan to her.

“Hmm... That’s some act. I mean, it does make some sense, but...”

“Isn’t constructing more homes your top priority? As long as there’s a human—an enemy—here, the village will never be able to relax.”

“I guess,” Fog mumbled, her arms crossed.

“So once everyone has calmed down, then I will escape. But not until then.”

“I’m okay with this, but are you sure?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your wagon’s full of stuff that’s really carefully wrapped up—most of it’s weapons, right? I don’t know a lot about life outside the

forest, but you're some kind of warrior, aren't you?"

"I was something like that, once."

"And you still don't care?"

"About what?"

"Come on, I mean...pride, shame, things like that. Won't those be a problem?"

"Why would they?"

Fog stared at him, ever-so-slight disappointment on her face.

"...Okay, I got it. Let's go with your plan." And so, the two began their preparations.

★

A band of kobolds had gathered to gather some more trees—but at the moment, they were all standing dumbstruck.

"Uh, so. As part of his sentence, I'm putting the human I caught to work." Fog stood in front of the group, and made her declaration with a sigh. Beside her stood the giant man in question, a collar around his neck. Fog held onto a rope leading to the collar.

"Starting today, I think I'll make him do all our heavy lifting, sunup to sundown. Go on, say hello to everyone!" she said, her voice flat like a poor actress reading from a script, then tugged hard on the rope. She smacked him across the backside with a stick she held in her other hand.

"Yowie! That hurts! Have mercy, ma'am!"

"No backtalk! Hurry up!" She gave him another smack. The kobolds froze at the sharp *crack!* that rang out—it sounded like Fog was swinging the stick with a fair bit of force.

"Ow ow ow..." Gaius rubbed his rear, then turned back toward the kobolds and put his fist against his chest, his elbow straight out. It was the royal salute of Igris, although normally he would be holding a sword.

"My name is Gaius Beldarus! I pledge to you my eternal devotion, so I beg of you, spare me from execution!"

For a while, the kobolds could only simply stare, utterly dumbstruck.

★

"Fog! We've stripped all the bark off this one, bring us another!" shouted one of the young kobold men, as he and the others lifted a bare tree trunk now devoid of bark and branches to their shoulders.

"Right! You heard them, get over there," Fog said from her perch atop Gaius's shoulder. She tapped her stick against his head to urge him on.

“Ma’am, yes ma’am!” he replied, his voice full of cheer as he hoisted the tree onto his other shoulder. With his strength, carrying a tree small enough to make a kobold house was no trouble at all.

The kobolds were still unused to a human’s presence, and still occasionally raised their voices in both fear and amazement, but by now they no longer trembled at the sight of him.

The sight of Fog steering him around the village, having seemingly tamed the beast, was also gradually causing them to lower their guard. Less because she’d made a human submit to her, but more because the pair of them looked so ridiculous.

Fog immediately wanted off his shoulder as soon as she realized this, but when she thought about how Gaius was deliberately putting himself in the role of prisoner, she felt like there was no choice but to persevere.

When she asked Gaius how he was holding up, she got a high-spirited reply. “I feel like a new recruit again. It’s so refreshing.” What a carefree man.

They’d made several, no, dozens of trips between the woods and the village, carrying items here and helping out there. Gaius was hauling the trees at such a pace the tree-clearing team eventually were unable to keep up.

After all, even though they were a group of men, each of them was still only around half the size of a human. Their tools, like the stone axes most of them wielded, were also somewhat primitive.

“Do you have any axes or anything like that, Gaius?”

“Yes, ma’am! They aren’t for cutting trees, but I do have several!”

At Gaius’s cheery response, Fog looked at him in amazement, and asked, “Really? Ones we can use?”

“They are somewhat heavy.”

“Somewhat, huh...? Heeey, Rain Grass!”

Rain Grass looked up from the tree he was stripping the bark from and called back, “What?”

“I was thinking of letting this guy have an axe and making him cut down some trees. What do you think?”

“Don’t be stupid! Who’d give a weapon to a prisoner?” Rain Grass said, waving a hand in front of his face as if to wave away the idiocy of her suggestion. Nearby kobolds also voiced their disapproval: “Yeah!” “No way!”

“I agree, ma’am!” said Gaius, which earned him a smack on the head. Instead, Fog ordered him to go and carry the bark that had been stripped away back to the village. They could put it to use by making fiber from it, or using it in foundations. Trimmings, too, could be used as kindling. The trunk wasn’t the only important part of the tree.

“Shall we load it into the cart and have Claudette take us back?”

“Now there’s a good idea, Gaius,” Fog said, wonder in her voice.

“Over my dead body! That’s where his weapons are!” Again, another kobold shot down their suggestion.

“Why not just take them out of the wagon, then?”

“They’re way too heavy for us to move!”

“Then make Gaius do it.”

“What are you saying, Fog...?” Their back-and-forth continued a while longer.

“Lizard! A lizard’s comiiiiiiing!” a voice cried out from the trees.

The kobolds’ ears instantly pricked up at the sound, and after looking around frantically their eyes all focused in the same direction. Several kobolds came running from that direction, their faces aghast.

“Get out of here! There’s a lizard!”

“A lizard’s coming!”

“Run! Hurry! Hurry!”

The kobolds all broke out in a run, shouting at each other to flee, their tools still in hand.

Gaius, on the other hand, did not budge. He asked Fog, “By ‘lizard,’ do they mean a ‘tree-eating lizard?’”

“Is that what you humans call them? Yeah, sounds like that’s the one.”

As far as magical beasts went, tree-eating lizards lived relatively near the outskirts of the Greatwood. The oversized reptiles could grow to nearly 12 feet long from head to tail, and just as the name implied, they fed on trees, particularly those native to the Greatwood. Vegetarian reptiles were a rarity.

Not only did they feed on live trees, they were able to sustain their massive sizes on this diet alone, defying human understanding of biology. Perhaps they played a role in maintaining the forest’s ecosystem.

Unlike bugbears, tree-eating lizards did not prey on humans or other beasts. However, they were violently territorial by nature; they would attack if anything so much as approached their territory. Fog had once seen one use its powerful teeth and jaws to kill a bugbear, which should have had the upper hand in a fight.

And once or twice, they had attacked the kobolds that ventured into the woods. For the villagers here, tree-eating lizards were one of the more familiar and predictable threats.

However, they didn’t attack to hunt for food, so as long as one was able to make it out of their territory, they would be safe. However...

“Fog, over there,” Gaius said and pointed, back to his normal self. She looked in that direction.

“...He’s not gonna make it!”

One young kobold was still up in the swaying branches of a tree, hanging on for dear life. The tree-eating lizard had stopped at the base of the tree. It slammed into the tree again and again, trying to shake him down. Another minute more and the trunk would surely break from this punishment.

That kobold had most likely realized that he could not outrun the beast, and instead had tried—and failed—to avoid its charge by hiding in a nearby tree.

“Gaius, hurry, go get a weapon!”

“There’s no time. I’m going just like this.”

Fog, still on his shoulder, yelled in surprise as he headed for the beast.

Sensing another presence, the tree-eating lizard’s eyes looked all around. It could not twist its relatively narrow neck far enough, so it had to turn its entire body around to face him. As soon as Gaius could see the reptile’s emotionless face, he sprinted at it without so much as a wind-up.

He charged at the beast at a surprisingly high speed for a man of his size. While he likely would not be able to make quick turns, he was a powerful sprinter.

Gaius dodged out of the way of those powerful jaws, and in the same motion, wrapped his arms tightly around its neck. He crouched, bringing himself down low, then twisted his body sideways and sprang upwards, throwing his weight backwards as he did so. The beast’s head hit the ground with the full force of Gaius’s weight and speed, snapping its neck instantly.

He jerked its neck back and forth, twisting it, again and again, as though trying to tear its head off. Eventually, he dropped the tree-eating lizard’s body.

...The kobolds raced back to the site of the attack, armed with spears. They were greeted by the sight of the lifeless lizard, the stunned young kobold sitting on the ground, and Fog, who was tending to him.

“Ah, welcome back, everyone! I’ll get back to work right now!”

The band of kobolds simply looked on as Gaius walked past, as though nothing had happened.

★

“TimmMMM-beeerrrr!”

As Gaius yelled, the kobolds cried out too—“Waaah...!”—and ran for cover.

Creeeaak creak creakcreak...thud. The tree crashed to the ground.

With a cry, the kobolds gathered around the fallen tree and set about removing the branches. Once that was done, they moved on to

the bark.

Gaius leaned his battleaxe against a nearby tree, ready to lend them a hand, but an older kobold waved and called out to him.

“Oi, Gaius! We’re fine over here. Why don’t you haul some bark back to the village?”

“Once you get that done, let’s have us a nice break,” Rain Grass chimed in, carrying the tree bark to Gaius’s cart.

“Understood,” Gaius replied with a smile.

Three weeks had already passed since the incident with the tree-eating lizard. Since then, Gaius had helped the villagers out of several predicaments, and had continued helping with construction. By now, he had completely dropped his act, hunting and working alongside the kobolds like it was the most natural thing in the world. Only the village elder objected to letting Gaius carry an axe or any other weapons.

To kobolds, who had lifespans shorter than that of humans, three weeks seemed like a much longer stretch. Gaius had turned his situation around in that time, from “captive” to “guest.”

Gaius left the branch-stripping work to the others, and as soon as he returned to the village, he was immediately mobbed by puppies...or rather, kobold children.

Black, brown, red—surprisingly, there were even blue kobolds. According to Fog, one’s fur color and pattern were determined at random, so even the same clan would contain families of many different shades.

“Carry me, carry me!”

“Welcome! Back!”

“Play with us, play with us!”

“Guess what? Guess whaaat?”

Kobolds can’t run very well on two legs when they’re young, so they often run on all fours, making them look exactly like puppies. The first one to reach Gaius was the blue-furred child: a boy, one of the older children. He always made a beeline for Gaius at times like these, sprinting at full speed. It seemed he was extremely fond of the man. As Gaius bent down to pet him, the other children immediately pounced on him, clambering up his back, arms, and into his lap. Gaius couldn’t move anymore, as any motion might cause him to fall over, and the children took advantage of that stillness to climb all the way up to his head.

“Are you all done with work?”

“No, he’d have more tree bark with him if they were done.”

“Do you have presents for us?”

“No, no...”

“I gotta peeeee...”

“Wait now, stay—”

“Lookit, I caught a grasshopper! C’mon, eat it!”

“I don’t eat insects...I said, *I don’t eat—*”

“I gotta peeeee!”

“Can’t it wait a little longer?”

Tug, tug.

“Come now, don’t pull at my hair. Aah, now see here! Don’t pull on an older man’s hair!”

“I don’t gotta pee anymore.”

“Oh, dear...”

After getting in a good laugh at the spectacle, the adults went to gather the children. But whenever one puffball was pulled off of him, they would immediately climb back on. It was quite a while before Gaius could move again.

★

“Right, I’ll go wash this for you, then.”

“My apologies,” said Gaius to Fog as he changed his clothes.

“Kids will be kids. No helping it. And I can draw some water from the lake once I’m done.”

She gave her left leg a slap. Running was still difficult, and she hadn’t been out on any hunts, but Fog’s leg was healed enough that it didn’t interfere with her everyday life. A walk to the lake would be no problem.

The lake, an important source of water, lay a short distance outside the forest, to the northeast of the village’s meadow. Because it was such a short trip, there was little risk of being attacked by beasts. On top of that, for whatever reason, beasts rarely came close to the twin mountains or the plains near the village in any event. Gaius once asked the villagers why that was, but they didn’t know the reason for it either, and all he got back were guesses. “The smell, maybe?” And since humans were of no use when it came to detecting scents, Gaius had left it at that.

“Hey misteeter!”

“Uncle!”

After changing into clean clothes, Gaius was sitting on a woven mat when two children sidled up to him. Fog’s son, Fluff, was pure white, still very young, and looked just like his name. The golden-colored girl beside him, only a little older, was Fog’s niece, Amber Blossom.

Now a full-fledged guest of the village, Gaius had moved from the storehouse into Fog’s home, under her supervision. The four of them were now in a pit dwelling that had been built especially so that a gigantic human could fit inside.

“Hnnngh...hup.” Fluff clambered up Gaius’s leg, pushing Blossom off of Gaius’s knee and stealing her seat.

“This spot’s mine!”

“Waaaah! Big Sis’s pickin’ on meeeee!”

“That’s enough now, Blossom.”

“Hmph...”

“Yaaay, Big Sis is in trouble! You’re stupid and dumb and stupid.”

Fluff’s fake sobbing quickly stopped.

“Fluuu-uuuff!” Blossom pounced on her cousin, annoyed by his teasing. Gaius pulled the two apart and sat them down separately on his left and right knees, holding them in place. This had become a common scene at Fog’s house.

“Don’t be silly, now. We’re having lunch soon,” Fog called out as she walked in, setting down skewers of meat in the sunken fireplace.

“Ah, I have something to tell you, Fog,” Gaius said, holding the two growling cousins in place.

“I’m thinking of going into town within the next few days, and I would like to discuss the trip with the villagers.”

“Town? A human one?”

“Indeed. Everyone here uses tools of stone and wood, right?”

“Well, what else are we supposed to use...? Oh, you mean metal, like your strange weapon. We don’t know how to make stuff like that.”

“Neither do I. I plan to commission some tools that you can use. Seeds and seedlings for planting, as well.”

“Red Eye said something about that while he was working on the fields, didn’t he?”

“Indeed.”

“Our potatoes and vegetables just won’t grow here—not at all like in our last village. Maybe some different crops would work better...yeah...” Fog rubbed her chin as she thought aloud.

“That’s fine and all, but it’s not like you can just get tools for free.”

“I have items I can trade them for. It will most likely be enough.” Gaius still had plenty of the money he’d left the capital with. The kobolds were a bartering society, and explaining it that way got the point across better than trying to explain the concept of money.

“And we still have some of the bugbear liver that the villagers dried, correct? That’s a prized medicinal ingredient among humans. If I can take that with me, I should be able to exchange it for the supplies we need.”

All of the magical beasts living in the outskirts of the Greatwood were abnormally resistant to poison, venom, and illness. Bugbears were especially hardy as their organs were able to efficiently break

down most toxins. Their livers held powerful medicinal properties, and were in high demand for their use in medicines and restorative tonics.

“Got it. I’ll explain it to the others, then. But you know, you’re going to an awful lot of trouble...do you really plan to live here?” Fog’s voice was a bit exasperated—and somehow pleased.

“Uncle’s gonna stay here forever? Yay!” Fluff had been listening closely, and cheered at the news.

“Be my dad, Uncle! You can do that now, right? Right?!”

“D-D-D-Don’t be stupid! Y-Y-You snot-nosed little brat!”

“Yeah! I’m gonna marry him, too! You dumb bed-wetter!”

“What?! You still wet the bed, too!”

“H-Hey!” The two broke free from Gaius’s grip and began another wrestling match.

“This is so stupid,” Fog muttered under her breath, her hand pressed against her forehead. Gaius laughed as he pulled the two fighting children away from each other once again.

Chapter 3: Encounter

In a small, secluded corner of a hallway, a girl was surrounded by classmates that she would hardly call her friends...

“Know your place, you dirty half-breed!”

“Yeah, you’re awfully cocky for someone that got kicked out of House Denan.”

...Her classmates were busy ridiculing her lineage.

The girl looked significantly younger than the others, and her ears, unlike theirs, were long and pointed, proof that she was not a pure-blooded human.

Half-elves like her were a frequent sight in the eastern kingdom where she’d once lived, but here in the west she stood out like a sore thumb, which made her an easy target for contempt. She’d worked hard so that no one could find fault with her, but all that effort had only earned her the wrath of the young nobility.

Nowadays, “knights” weren’t really knights. The era of donning armor and helmets, and riding into battle on horseback, had ended. The majority of soldiers now wielded magic wands and sorcery on the battlefield instead of swords, and in recent years many knights had taken up work as military commanders or reserve soldiers, at the beck and call of the royalty and nobility alike. Some had even become bureaucrats. All across the southern region, the line between “military officer” and “civil servant” grew more and more blurry.

A few kings ago, the Royal Knights’ Academy of Igris was established “in order to appoint people to positions as needed, regardless of status,” according to the needs of the time. Compared to neighboring lands and territories, where personal connections ruled, it was a fairly progressive principle.

But over time, those principles waned, and in recent years, the Royal Knight Academy was more akin to a feather for well-bred youths to wear in their caps. At the very least, the system still allowed some upward mobility for the common folk, one of its few saving graces.

This girl had ignored all of that, besting the scions of the gentry with her excellent grades. The other students of common birth knew better than to interfere with the nobles’ peacocking, and would purposely underperform to stay out of their way. She, on the other hand, did not yet know enough about their world to practice these

kinds of self-preservation tactics.

She'd been taken to Igris relatively recently, in order to preserve the Denan bloodline, so it made sense that she wouldn't know about internal politics at the Academy.

"What does this kingdom even need a shrimp like you for?" One of the young aristocrats, a blonde boy, grabbed her by the ear and twisted it. She winced in pain and let slip a small whine, but put up no resistance—or rather, she couldn't.

Elves lived very long lives, which meant it took a longer time for them to reach physical maturity. Their emotional maturity, possibly held back by their physical growth, also lagged behind that of humans. And because of her mixed blood, the young woman was no exception. At seventeen, she was old enough to attend the Academy, but her face and stature did not reflect her age.

All she could do was wait for them to tire of their harassment.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she pleaded, her eyes brimming with tears, even though she'd done nothing wrong.

Even as one of them spat on her face, all she could do was endure it, apologizing over and over again.

Why am I even here?

Once a proper, suitable heir had been born to House Denon, she was no longer needed, and so she'd been thrown into the Knight Academy.

She had no support. They wouldn't send her back home. Even if she were to escape, she had nowhere else to go. Nowhere at all.

Mom, why did you sell me off?

"What were they thinking, letting a half-elf like you into this glorious Academy?" the blonde boy spat. He grabbed her chin and jerked it up, forcing her to stand on tiptoe.

"Get the hell out of here," he whispered in her ear. An inky blackness began to spread over her heart.

I can't take this anymore. I don't want to be here. I just want to run away.

That was it. Even if she had no destination in mind, even if she were to die alone it would be far better than staying here.

So I'll—

At that very moment, an enormous hand grabbed the young noble's arm. *Very* tightly.

When she looked behind her—or rather, above her, she saw that the boy's face was frozen in fear. She, too, found it difficult to breathe at the terrifying sight before her.

...A bad omen. That was the best way to describe his appearance. His face was covered in scars, and a ferocious glint was in his eye. A tattoo was neatly inscribed on his left cheek. No matter how you

looked at him, the man was clearly trouble.

The fact that someone like him had snuck into the Royal Knight Academy, full of children from very important families, was a major problem.

The man reminded her of the adventurers that had brought her here from her homeland, but the air of intimidation he possessed was far more oppressive. A kind of miasma practically radiated from him, one of murderous intent and violence incarnate.

“Eek! Wh-Who do you think you are?!” “Where are those useless guards?!” Her classmates’ panicked shouts overlapped one another.

But very shortly afterward, one of them gasped in realization.

“Baron Beldarus...” Hearing that, the rest of the group fell deathly still, as though frozen in place.

I’ve heard that name before... she remembered.

The hero of the Five-Year War, whose brave feats were eclipsed by the terrible names he had been given: “Ally-Killer,” “Gaius the Maneater.” Known as the previous king’s mad dog, and a bloodthirsty monster. Baron Gaius Beldarus!

The Black Rose of Igris...! He was just as, no, even more horrifying in person than in the rumors. Her knees trembled.

The aristocrats’ children were in the same state she was.

“Ah. Just now...you...said something or other about half-elves, yes?” the baron said slowly, releasing the blonde boy’s arm. Still shaking, his head bobbed up and down. The girl couldn’t tell whether the movement was a response to his question, or a reflex of the terror that had seized him.

“To tell the truth, I’m one-fourth troll myself.” Astonished, her classmates’ jaws dropped.

“Perhaps I should not have attended this academy, either...?” he went on, his teeth bared.

“Th-That’s not it, milord!” the blonde boy managed to choke out. “I-I’m sorry!” He fled, on the verge of tears. The others scattered like roaches.

Gaius groaned as he watched them run away. Then, after a slight sigh, he turned to face the girl.

“Are you all right?”

“Y...Yes...” She only barely got her voice to work. Thinking about how petrified her classmates looked, she didn’t blame them one bit.

The baron drew a cloth from his breast pocket and handed it to her, gesturing for her to wipe the spit from her cheek.

It finally dawned on her that *the* Lord Beldarus had just saved her.

“Th-Thank you so much.”

Gaius the Maneater replied, once again grimacing threateningly, “It was nothing. But I have a favor to ask of you. Could you show me

to the teacher's lounge?" In a trembling voice, she agreed.

"That would be a big help. I have a delivery, you see." In his left hand, he held a bag labeled "Gym Clothes." He came just to deliver...*that*?

"This building was very different in my day. I can't find my way around now at all." The half-elf girl could only reply with a vague, "Mm."

"Now then, after you," Lord Beldarus said, waiting for her to lead the way.

...She couldn't recall much of what happened along the way.

All she remembered was the fear of turning around, and the speed with which she had walked.

After showing him to the teacher's lounge, Lord Beldarus thanked her and gave her another intimidating snarl before passing through the door. She gasped and jumped back before making a run for it.

...That was how Sashalia Denan and Gaius Beldarus first met.

It wasn't until much, much later that she had realized that his expression had been a smile, not a snarl.

The wagon jostled its way down the road, jumping at every turn of its wheels. Sashalia was lying fast asleep in one of its seats when a particularly nasty bump shook her out of her dream and back to reality. She hurriedly adjusted her glasses and scanned her surroundings, but all she found was that her fellow passenger was slumped over asleep, just as she had been. At least she wasn't the only one embarrassing herself.

A dream about the past... She smiled nostalgically.

It's been five—no, six years since then... Despite her young looks, Sashalia had grown rapidly on the inside ever since she'd found someone worth pursuing.

After that incident, Sashalia had continued to earn top grades without fear of reprisal, and she had graduated admirably as second-highest-ranked student in her class.

It's likely that she would have been valedictorian, if not for the fact that physical strength was an important factor in the final assessments. However, her grades were so strong that they made up for that lack, and no one could deny that she had worked incredibly hard.

Her well-bred bullies were no longer a problem, so she no longer had to keep her head down. With her strong academic performance, Sashalia had easily secured the post of her dreams. That assignment had been with none other than the Knights of the Chain, captained by Baron Beldarus. By that point, this station was by no means a path to success, as its personnel and budget had been slashed by the current king. But to Sashalia, it was worth all the blood, sweat, and tears; all

the scorn, and all her wasted youth.

She got to spend a year and a half with the Knights of the Chain—eighteen months working under Captain Beldarus. It was no exaggeration to say that those had been the happiest months of her entire life.

But now...

That brilliant time had suddenly been cut short by the demon called “personnel restructuring.” She bid her captain a tearful farewell as she left for her new post in the royal bureaucracy. Between that time and now, she’d worked as just another bureaucrat. She was now en route back to the capital after a long-term business trip in Lucastle, the earldom of House Raftia. Lucastle lay to the west of the capital, and in between was a fort where, for the past two months, Sashalia had been assisting with repairs. Securing supplies, recruiting labor, revising plans—they’d overworked her the whole time. Once the repairs themselves were underway, Sashalia was finally set free.

Why even bother fixing up that dump of a fort, anyway? In the fifteen years following the Five-Year War, there had been no signs of any further conflict between Igris and its former enemies, the three neighboring nations that once banded together to fight Igris. The current king’s cousin, Princess Lula, had married into the royal family of one of those three kingdoms to secure the peace that existed today.

Not only did Lucastle have forts, it was also a buffer between Igris and the kingdom to the west. If national defense was a priority, then wouldn’t it make more sense to work with the earldom to construct new forts, ones nearer to the border with Igris’s neighbor? Surely that would be more effective than fixing up a dilapidated old fort so close to the capital.

Not that those of us on the ground know what the higher-ups are thinking... Perhaps they considered it maintenance of a public utility, or a project to promote the peace. At the end of the day, a low-ranking official like Sashalia’s opinion bore no weight in political affairs.

Realizing this grim fact made her exhaustion come creeping back once more, and her eyes grew heavy. Sashalia welcomed it, using the fatigue to her advantage—sleep would make the journey feel shorter.

★

Sashalia was on her way back to her housing complex when someone called to her. It was the landlady of her boarding house.

“Welcome back, Redhead. A letter came for you while you were away.”

Sashalia took the envelope her landlady held out to her, and her eyes went wide when she saw the sender’s name. She thanked her

landlady quickly before racing off to her room, dropping her things by the door and sitting down to read before properly putting her things away.

Sashalia took a moment to appreciate the penmanship, which had quite some charm to it, before she began reading the letter.

Dear Miss Denan,

Have you been well? I am in good health. All the traveling you do with the royal bureau must take a toll on you.

While it is certainly a worthwhile position, work fatigue is the enemy of health. You have a tendency to push yourself too hard, so I worry for you. No overdoing it allowed—captain's orders.

As for myself, I've taken leave of my position and have decided to return to the countryside. I also intend to renounce my title. Since the Beldarus name was a dear gift from the previous king, I shall keep it.

Quite some time has passed since I was married to Princess Lula, and our relations with other kingdoms are peaceful now. You could say I have outlived my usefulness. It is about time a new generation took over the Knights of the Chain, as well.

I do not believe my home village exists anymore, but I will search for a place to settle down in the surrounding area if it does not.

I will write you again once I have settled in.

—Gaius Beldarus

After reading the whole letter, Sashalia's already-wide eyes grew even wider. She'd been muttering along to herself in a low, quick voice as she read, but once she finished she blurted out—"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What on earth?!" Her head was positively spinning. The sudden transfer, the way her superiors pushed their work off onto her, the scorn of the well-bred knights—the only reason Sashalia could endure all that the royal bureau had thrown at her was because she'd had hope, hope that one day she'd be allowed to return to the order of the Knights of the Chain. And now, that hope was gone.

"What's the point anymore..." Sashalia's shoulders slumped, the strength leaving her body.

"Wait, no...that's not true...!"

She quickly lifted her head, and in her heart renounced what she had just said. Sashalia had realized something: this was her chance.

As soon as it dawned on her, the young knight leapt into action, and she began to draft a letter of resignation on the spot. Mentally, she drew up a rough plan: how she would vacate her lodging, and what the journey would look like. With that first step completed, she set off back toward the bureau.

That's right. There's no reason for me to stick around here anymore.

She recalled her past self, the one who had remained trapped at the Knight Academy because she had nowhere else to go. Had she

changed at all since then?

No, it's different now.

She had no reason to stay, but now, she most definitely did have a place to go—somewhere she *wanted* to go.

★

“That’s fine, right?” “I think it’s a good idea.” The kobolds were all in agreement. All except one:

“How could it possibly be a good idea?!” shouted none other than the village elder.

Everyone had gathered in a large pit-style dwelling built for meetings. With Gaius’s help, village construction had improved by leaps and bounds, making buildings like this one a possibility.

Even so, it was still too cramped to give every head of household their own seat, which meant that several kobolds were perched on Gaius’s shoulders and knees. Young and old, it seemed they all wanted to try climbing that gentle giant.

“Go on then, see what happens if you let him go back! He’ll tell the other humans where we are and bring them right to us! They’ll attack! Can’t you see?!” he shouted, his heated tirade punctuated by the occasional glare at Gaius.

But another voice spoke out in disagreement. It was from a middle-aged kobold named Red Eye, the father of Fishbone, the young kobold that Gaius had saved from a collapsed house.

“Gaius won’t do that. Elder, your nose is even better than ours most of the time. If we can tell he’s not that kind of guy, then there’s no way you can’t.”

“Hmph! I’m not buying it. Just watch, the second he leaves the forest, he’ll make a run for it.”

“Then all we need to do is send someone to keep an eye on him.”

“That’s not the problem—”

“White Fog!” Red Eye cut him off. “You go with Gaius. If he says anything about this village, you kill him right then and there! Got it?”

Confusion flitted across her face momentarily, but she soon understood the meaning behind his words.

“Of course,” she replied with a smirk.

“This farce is going too far!” the elder cried, but the kobolds around him simply brushed away his anger, hushing him gently to calm him down.

“How many days will this take, Gaius?” asked Fog.

“Claudette won’t need to stop for food or rest, so it should be no more than three days, one way.”

“That’s quite a trip.”

“The next town is a fair distance away, even once you leave the

forest. The dried river does help, though,” Gaius said. He rubbed his chin, then muttered something else, more to himself than anyone in particular. “Not even an infantry unit would make it through these woods in a single day...” He seemed lost in his memories.

“...All the twists and turns in the riverbed add a considerable distance to the trip,” he continued. “You can all run through the trees unimpeded, but my wagon cannot. It’s confined to the path made by the riverbed. If I just rode Claudette, I wouldn’t have that problem, but without the wagon we can’t bring back nearly enough supplies.”

“Do we really need to bring that much back?”

“I intend to.”

“Hmm...” Fog thought it over as she turned to Red Eye. “Right, then. Red Eye, can I leave the little ones with you?”

“Course you can,” he said, nodding. “Fishbone’ll be happy to have the company.”

“That’s that, then.”

“Meeting adjourned!”

“Whew! I’ve been needing to take a leak this whole time...”

“Same here.”

The chattering of the older kobolds signaled an end to the gathering, and everyone else followed suit.

And so, it was decided that Gaius and Fog would go into town to purchase supplies.

★

“Whoa, Mom, that’s so cool! I wanna go too!”

“Auntie, that’s no fair!”

The two children were raising a fuss as usual, rolling around on the floor, but for once they were on the same side. Fog gave them a sideways glance as she continued to pack for the trip. “We’re not going for fun! We’re doing a job for the village.”

“No faaair!” They whined in unison and continued to roll about.

Gaius laughed. “I’ll buy you two some souvenirs, so be good.”

“Really? Yay!” Fluff cheered. He and Amber Blossom leapt up, wagging their tails.

“All right, all right, time for bed,” chided Fog. “We’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

“Okaaay.” The two children and one middle-aged man singsonged in harmony before all heading off to bed.

...As the next day passed, the two made it safely through the forest and reached the highway without any trouble from magical beasts or any other obstacles. Their journey along the highway, too, was a peaceful one.

They arrived safely at Ryburgh, a moderately sized city in the

territory of the Marquis of Northplain.

Many of the rivers that ran through the western kingdoms originated in the depths of the Greatwood. After reaching out beyond the woods, they converged into larger rivers that led to the sea. Water sustains life for all creatures, and rivers sustain livelihoods, so towns naturally tend to form in river basins. The town of Ryburgh was no exception. Even its name was a shortened and corrupted form of a phrase meaning “city by the river.”

★

“Maaasteer!”

The young blacksmith’s apprentice burst into the workshop earning him a glare from the salt-and-pepper-haired “master.”

“What’re you yelling about, boy?”

“C-C-C-Customers, sir! Th-Th-Th-They say they have work for us!”

“Have you been hitting the bottle early this morning?” the smith asked in exasperation. “If someone wants to buy from us, let ’em in!”

“M-Me, sir?! Please, don’t make me do it!”

“And why in the hell not? How am I gonna take their order if they don’t get in here? Just do it like you always do.”

What’ll it be this time? thought the blacksmith. *Spades, hoes, sickles? No wait, let me guess: horseshoes. Day in, day out, it’s the same old thing.* Ever since becoming a blacksmith, he’d longed to forge swords and spears. Smithies were for making weapons—a slightly skewed way of looking at the craft, but for a long, long time, that’s what he’d believed.

But now, fifteen years after the Five-Year War, requests for weapons were very few and far between. House Zigan, Northplain’s ruling family, was embroiled in a power struggle between its eldest daughter and the second son, but no actual conflict had broken out yet, which meant no requests for weaponry. So long as there was no fighting, their power plays were of no use to his workshop.

If anything, they only made things worse. Failure to maintain the settlements meant they were being abandoned one by one—and *that* meant no more jobs from those fighting off magical beasts on the frontier. Adventurers still came through now and again, but only rarely. There wasn’t nearly enough work to satisfy the blacksmith’s spirit.

“B-But, sir...” the apprentice hesitated yet again.

“No ‘but’s! Get out there already and...”

He was interrupted by the sight of a man in the doorway. The apprentice disappeared through the back door in the blink of an eye. In that moment, the blacksmith realized why his disciple had been so

afraid.

The massive, muscled figure towered nearly seven feet tall. His countenance was covered in battle scars. An ominous tattoo stood out on his left cheek. A gaze so sharp it seemed to pierce through the smith's heart was directed entirely at him.

This was their "customer."

"I apologize for the sudden request. Might you be the master of this forge?" the customer asked, his words slow and deliberate.

"Th-That's right." His reply came haltingly, seemingly daunted by the presence before him. But on the inside, he felt like lightning had struck his heart.

This guy's not your everyday peasant! He gulped.

Sure, he's trying to act like a nice guy by carrying a dog around, but I can tell! He stinks of blood! There's a man that was born to fight, a natural killing machine!

"I'd like to place an order. Custom, not ready-made."

The blacksmith couldn't help but laugh aloud triumphantly, his face alight with joy.

"What'll it be?! A sword? A sword, right? Maybe a broadsword? Or a falchion? Haha! A big guy like you probably wants a claymore you can wield one-handed, don'tcha?!"

"No, I don't need a sword—"

"Polearms, then! A spear? A pike? A glaive? You look like you'd know your way around a halberd!"

Again, the customer shook his head.

"Axes."

The blacksmith couldn't contain his wonder.

"Axes, yes, axes. Goes well with all that muscle. Any axe you swing would hack through a shield like wet paper. So what kind'll it be? A battleaxe? Crescent axe? A bardiche, perhaps? Or maybe...an executioner's axe?"

"No, a felling axe. One with enough heft and thickness for someone of my size."

"You're cutting...trees?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. The blacksmith was the one to break the silence.

"Heh heh, you've gotta be sly about it, eh? 'Cutting trees...' Can't get caught by the missus, I understand. I'll make you one that looks just like the real deal. I hear ya. Loooud and clear."

"Excellent. I have other items I'd like to commission."

"Like what? Maces?"

"More felling axes. Lots of them. Twenty or so. About the size a child might use."

“Child-sized...? Oh, I see now. You want to use them for throwing.”

“For felling trees,” the customer reminded him.

“Ah, ’scuse me. Right, ‘felling trees.’”

“I’ll also take twenty hoes, ten sickles, and ten metal hammers, all as small as the axes.”

“Gotta pretend they’re just everyday household objects? You’re good.”

“I’m not pretending to do anything.” The customer scowled, his eyes ablaze.

“Come on now, don’t look at me like that. No harm, no foul. I’ll do it.”

“I should have more than enough, but what is my total?”

The customer withdrew a leather pouch from his breast pocket and set it down on the table with a satisfying jingle. The pouch opened, gold coins spilling out.

He just throws around that much money like it’s nothing... This guy really is a shady character.

The blacksmith withdrew the man’s fee from the pile of coins.

“Should you need any more payment,” the customer said, “do let me know.”

The blacksmith waved a hand in front of his face with a light laugh and replied, “No need, I’ve already taken my hush money along with the bill.”

“Is that so? Allow me to finally introduce myself—my name is Gaius. For the next two days, I will be staying in a lodge just outside the city. I’d like you to deliver the tools once they’re completed. Would that be all right?”

The blacksmith agreed. He didn’t bother to look into the name, nor did he ever intend to—after all, it was surely just an alias.

“I’ve got no other rush orders, so I can do that. Might not look it, but this is the best smithy in town.”

“You do seem trustworthy. Now then, I leave it in your hands.” With that, “Gaius” gave the smith a nod and took his leave. Immediately afterward, a pair of voices could be heard on the other side of the workshop wall.

“‘Hush money...?’ Is that an industry term for ‘customization fee’?”

“How should I know?”

The blacksmith, however, didn’t hear a thing; he was lost in an elated stupor, a look of utter bliss on his face.

“I knew it... A smithy ain’t a smithy if it ain’t makin’ weapons!”

“Are you still hung up on that?”

The pair was homeward-bound, the wagon now loaded up on supplies. The now-full wagon rolled down the highway. Along with the tools from the smithy, Gaius and Fog had also purchased seeds and seedlings for planting new crops.

Fog stretched her legs out in the back of the wagon, leaning against the pile of goods. “It’s not a big deal. So what if you made some kids cry and some ladies faint?”

“...They called the guards, as well,” Gaius mumbled dejectedly, his hands tightly gripping the reins. “After staying in the kobold village, that sort of reception feels new again...in a bad way.”

“Huh... I can’t read human faces too well, but seems you’re pulling a real awful one right now, aren’t you?”

At that, Gaius’s shoulders fell into an even deeper slump. After a brief silence, he turned to Fog. “Never mind that. How was your experience in town with me? Was it all right?”

While the residents of Ryburgh were not themselves the killers, she had still lost her husband and loved ones at the hands of humans. Gaius had been concerned about effectively taking her into the lion’s den, so to speak.

“Wasn’t my favorite thing in the world, to tell you the truth. But being surrounded by so many humans meant I smelled lots of different kinds of souls. You know, they weren’t all like the bunch that attacked us, so there’s that.”

“Is that so?”

Fog, however, had already known that the human race was not a monolith, that they even killed their own.

“Some folks’ souls really stank, though... Gaius, wait a sec!”

Gaius gave Claudette the order to slow down, spinning around to see that Fog was now sitting up straight. Her ears stood at attention, her expression grim as she appeared to be listening closely for something.

“What is it, Fog?”

“Angry voices, and moaning. And the smell of blood. To the left.”

Jumping from the parked wagon, Gaius looked in that direction and focused. It didn’t take long to find the source: several people were gathered in front of a thicket of trees just off the highway.

“I don’t think that’s an ordinary gathering...” The reasoning behind Gaius’s judgment was clear. The group was armed, standing around something that they were taking turns kicking.

“...Thieves.”

Unlike the guards that watched over cities and towns, and the mutual surveillance and neighborhood watch systems that villages employed, there was no one to stand guard out in the plains. Thieves

and murderers used this to their advantage. In light of this, nobles and royalty would typically arrange for there to be some kind of highway patrol system along major thoroughfares to maintain the peace. Whether or not there was order on the road was a barometer of sorts, a reflection of that region's honor, so much so that the ruling lords fought for the right to preside over them. And yet, trouble was happening on one of those very roads—one not far from the city at all. That a band of outlaws could do their "jobs" in broad daylight was proof that Northplain's marquess was losing more and more control over the region.

"Humans really do love doing this kind of stuff... So, what'll we do?"

"I can't let this be. Would you mind waiting a mo—hmm? What is it, Fog?"

Fog had crawled out from the wagon bed and was now resting her elbows on the driver's seat, barely suppressing a snicker.

"Heh heh heh... You know, I kinda like that part of you."

Gaius tilted his head. "Oh? You do?" He then picked up a broom they'd bought in town and took off running.

★

"Oi! You over there!"

The group of men looked up from the victim they'd been tormenting and turned in the direction of that shout.

They saw a lone man running toward them. In his hand, he was waving something: not a weapon, but what looked like a broom.

"What an idiot," one of the men spat. He looked to be in his forties, and on his cheek was a nasty burn scar. As the oldest one in the group, he served as the leader of the band of thieves.

"Thieving" was perhaps too light a term for it. They stole by force, and were not above resorting to murder—and in fact, they had before. Indeed, the scarred man's subordinates were just about to dispose of the evidence of their latest robbery. One would have to be an absolute fool to approach them now.

"Is this guy crazy or something, boss?" one of the lackeys, a one-eyed man, asked, although the question was purely rhetorical. Any sane person who knew the reality of life in this domain would recognize the dangerous scene for what it was and stay far away.

"Who knows? Doesn't matter. Now that he's seen us, he's a problem. Let's fix that."

The group of six robbers left their half-dead victim to welcome the strange man, their swords brandished.

"If he really is a lunatic, we can't just rush him. Once we've surrounded him, we'll all go for the...gut..." The boss's voice died out,

and he began to blink repeatedly and squint his eyes, as though dust had gotten inside them.

Strange. He was closer than he should have been.

“Is that even a human? He’s huge...like a giant...”

“And his face...he’s bad news!”

The boss sneered at his underlings. “What the hell are you scared of?! Who cares if he’s got a little muscle on him?! He’s basically unarmed, just kill him!”

“Yeah!” the gang replied in unison, having regained their spirit. They rushed toward the man and soon encircled him.

“Go, now!”

At the command, the five robbers all thrust their swords simultaneously. Tragically, the giant of a man was skewered...zero times.

The man managed to dodge all five assailants’ swords, then used the handle of his broom to jab a robber in the throat. Before they could recover from their missed strike, the giant man struck another assailant with a swift chop to the back of the neck, knocking him unconscious. The remaining three narrowly managed to avoid stabbing each other and finally regained their footing, only to find that the large man was resting the broom handle across his shoulders, waiting patiently to ask them a question.

“I’d like to make sure of something before I continue. You *are* highway robbers, is that right?”

“Don’t let him scare you! Keep going!” The leader of the bandits started shouting before Gaius had finished his question. In the blink of an eye, the madman had taken down two of his own; the boss wanted to end this before his underlings fully processed that and hesitated. Fortunately, the huge man was now stuck standing between the boss and his lackeys.

We can take him. We can still kill him.

As the boss reassured himself of their chances, he took a step forward—but in that same moment, their target quickly dropped into a crouch and grabbed one of the fallen bandits’ ankles. In the same motion that one would use to shake excess water from a piece of clothing, he lifted the unconscious man with ease and swung his body around, mowing down the remaining three lackeys before tossing the limp body back on the ground. He turned to face the bandit boss just as the smaller man tried to flee. But before he could even finish turning away, his escape, and consciousness, were cut short. The last thing the boss saw was the handle of that broom digging into his solar plexus.

With one last glance at the incapacitated robbers, some passed out and some collapsed in agony, Gaius walked back to the person they'd been surrounding. As he'd expected, their "prey" was still on the ground, but was now sitting legs crossed.

The robbers had treated their victim terribly: the swelling was dreadful, and while there was quite a bit of blood, he was still conscious; fortunately, the worst-case scenario had not come to pass.

The man wore traveling clothes, and his build was relatively small. Downright short, actually; if he were to stand, he would likely be the height of an average human child. His build, however, was muscular and broad-shouldered, giving him a stout yet powerful impression.

"Are you all right?" Gaius asked.

"Bloody hell, yer a proper beast! And lookit the size o' that broom!" He exclaimed in reply. Despite the terrible swelling, his face was visibly that of a young man. He went on excitedly.

"Thank ye, gramps! I'm a right fierce warrior come from the Great Anvil, son o' Dwaske, the great dwarf Dwaemon! I'm off to make a name for meself as a hero—and a proper harem too, so's I can feast and drink all day!"

...Dwarves. They were a race that lived in the Great Anvil, a mountain that towered up from the heart of the Greatwood. Their numbers were few to begin with, making them an extremely rare sight in the western kingdoms, but even so their existence was known throughout Igris—as protectors, natural-born warriors, adherents of a unique culture, and so on. They appeared in most tales of heroism that were brought over from foreign lands. In other words, their race was practically legendary.

"You're the first dwarf I've ever seen," marveled Gaius. "How unexpected. All I ever see here in the west are humans."

"Ye've got some troll blood, don't ye? 'Bout one-quarter, I'd say."

"You can tell?" Gaius was more than a little taken aback at having been seen through in an instant.

"Great Anvil's got all sorts. Ye develop an eye for it. Me greengrocer's a troll, and so's the missus that lives three doors down. Troll lasses, can't git enough of 'em! When they flex their muscles, their chebs go bouncin'!"

"Hm? I suppose they would," Gaius nodded, recalling the faint memory of his mother's appearance before remembering himself.

"My apologies. My name is Gaius. We just happened by on our way home from a supply trip."

"Ye saved my hide, Gaius. Crivvens, I'd 'eard the roads round here were crawlin' with trouble, but this is summat else."

"Especially here in Northplain, with all this political turmoil. It's

no place for a child on his own.”

“Who’s a child? I’m almost fifteen!”

Gaius winced at his accidental rudeness.

“In any case, Dwa...emon, was it? You’re badly hurt. Will you let me treat your wounds?” he asked; the dwarf looked the type to put up a fight. The swollen face he stared at looked like a ragged rock, and there were most likely broken bones underneath.

“Naw, I’m awright. A li’l spit and I’ll be good as new. Still got a little enchanted medicine with me, too. Haven’t you heard? Ye wanna kill a dwarf, ye’ve got tae lop ’is head off, otherwise he’ll keep kickin’. And even if ye do that, stick ’is head back on and that’ll heal, too! At least, that’s what they say!” He threw his legs out in front of him, leaning back on his hands as he joked and boasted in equal measure.

“So, gramps,” he continued, “What’ll ye do with those robbers?”

“Restrain them, take them back to town, and leave them to the guards. Allow me to take you back, as well.”

“And after that?”

“I’ll return to my village,” Gaius replied, holding a hand out to help Dwaemon to his feet. The dwarf accepted his help, and for a moment, he stood there in thought, his hand on his chin.

“...Hey, gramps. Yer village, does it have a few bonnie lasses?” This time, Dwaemon’s expression was noticeably more meek. Gaius, on the other hand, lit up at the question.

“It does! More than a few. Every girl there is absolutely adorable! Everyone is so kind and gentle! I, myself, can’t believe how much fun we all have every day.” He threw his head back and laughed, his face glowing with happiness.

“Really? Is that right? Well, now...”

“Indeed, it is.”

“Gramps, can I tag along wit’ ye back to yer village?”

“I’m a new resident myself, so it’s not for me to say... I would have to ask my traveling companion firs—”

“Gaius! Something’s coming down the road!” shouted a voice from his wagon. It was Fog, and she’d noticed an approaching presence. When Gaius looked in her direction, he could see it too: three or so horseback riders were approaching from the distance.

“Fog, stay hidden!”

“Got it! You be careful, Gaius.”

“Eh? What is it? More bandits?” Dwaemon asked as he tried to see through his swollen eyelids. He had to use his fingers to open them wider.

Gaius also kept his gaze locked on the approaching figures, but as he realized there was no more need to keep his guard up, he sighed and let his shoulders relax.

“No, not bandits—knights.”

★

“My name is Wyatt. I serve as a knight to the head of House Zigan and marchioness of Northplain, Lady Keighley. I also preside over the Ryburgh Adventurers’ Guild.”

The man that introduced himself appeared to hold the highest rank among the three knights. He stood tall, at just over six feet, and together with his gallant features he cut a very dashing, knightly figure. He appeared to be around the same age as Gaius, or perhaps ever-so-slightly younger.

Gaius recognized the crest emblazoned on his chestplate; that gauntlet motif most definitely belonged to House Zigan. Unauthorized use of a family crest was a crime so serious it could result in execution, but from the man’s words alone, Gaius could tell he hadn’t spoken a single lie.

Gaius turned to face Wyatt and knelt before him before speaking.

“My name is Gaius. On my way home from purchasing goods in Ryburgh, I happened to apprehend these bandits. I was just about to take them back to town and turn them in to the guards.” Behind him, Dwaemon was binding the bandits’ limbs and making them sit up in a neat line.

One of the younger knights behind Wyatt stepped forward and whispered to him, “Sir, the man with the burns... I believe there are wanted posters for him. Suspected of murder, they say.”

Wyatt nodded as he listened, then asked, “You captured all six men by yourself?”

“I have a bit of martial arts training.”

“Are the scars on your face from combat?”

“Some are not, but most are.”

“Did you serve in the Five-Year War?”

“I did, in Igris’s army.”

“As did I. Although at the time, I was just another private. Were you at the Battle of Snake Bush?”

“I participated, yes.”

“Is that so? My, that does take me back.” Wyatt gave a light-hearted laugh. “Excellent work, Gaius. Will you come back to town with us? The reward for their capture will be yours.”

“I will pass, Sir Guildmaster. I would like to continue making my way back home. Forgive me my shamelessness in leaving you with this lot, but if you could see to them, I would be much obliged.”

“That I don’t mind, but the reward...?”

“Transporting these goods to their destination is most important to me at the moment, so I’m afraid I must decline.”

"An unselfish man. Understood. I'll see to it."

"I am grateful. Now then, if you would excuse us." Still kneeling, Gaius bowed his head even lower in appreciation before standing and walking away with Dwaemon.

"Oi, gramps, ye really don' need the reward?"

"No, I do not. We need to get these seedlings to the village. I'd like to hurry back, too."

Wyatt watched as they chatted and walked away.

"Gaius, eh..." He mulled over the name—and the next second, his eyes widened in surprise. Now agitated, he yelled after Gaius.

"Hold it right there, you—I mean... You are Baron Gaius Beldarus, correct?!"

Gaius stopped and turned around slowly.

"I remember now! That black rose on your left cheek! 'The Black Rose of Igris,' 'Slayer of Fifty,' 'Ally-Killer...'" Wyatt cut his own rambling short, clearing his throat before continuing.

"You're *the* Baron Beldarus? Captain of the Knights of the Chain?!"

Gaius sighed, scratching the side of his head in embarrassment.

"That is indeed my name. And that was once my title. However..."

"Oho, I knew it!" Wyatt exclaimed, rushing to catch up to the pair. In his excitement, his breathing grew labored, and his eyes shone. The two knights that seemed to work under him couldn't hide their exasperation.

"To think that I would meet you...here! What an incredible honor, Lord Beldarus!"

"Wait, please. I am no longer a baron, nor am I the captain of the knights. I am simply Beldarus now."

"I beg your pardon...?"

"Working in the capital was tiring. The other day, I resigned at last, renounced my title, and returned to my hometown. I no longer hold any special rank now. I'm simply an unemployed commoner." He ended with an embarrassed laugh, scratching his head once again.

"Impossible...! You're the hero of the Five-Year War!"

"I was never a hero. I simply survived."

"But you were given peerage...direct control over the Knights of the Chain, and all its rich history! 'Stand by the Sword'—the very motto itself reflects every soldier's truest desire! And you threw it all away—even your rank among the nobility—!"

Wyatt had been deeply shaken by his conversation with Gaius; the words spilling out rapidly.

"Well, I was never very good with all of that."

"I can't believe this..."

"In any case, I'm currently the guest of a village close to where I was raised. They're teaching me how to fell trees and till land, though

I'm not any good at it."

"The Black Rose of Igris...felling trees...?!"

"Yes. Now then, Sir Guildmaster, if you'll excuse us. I leave the bandits in your hands." Gaius bowed deeply before climbing back into his wagon, together with Dwaemon, and driving off down the highway.

Still in utter astonishment, Wyatt simply stood and watched them leave.

★

One of the young knights, having cautiously waited for a chance to speak, finally tried calling out to Wyatt. When her boss turned around, his expression was the most displeased she'd ever seen him look. His eyes burned at her as he scowled.

"...What."

One of his subordinates withered under the harsh gaze, while the other managed to muster enough courage to reply.

"We should head back soon, sir. Walking with this lot will cost us some time, as well."

After letting out a sigh, Wyatt nodded, then turned to face the bandits.

"You said one was wanted for murder?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which means they'll be executed, no doubt."

"I believe so, sir."

The captive bandits moaned, but otherwise seemed to accept their fates.

"In that case... There shouldn't be any problem if I take care of them here and now."

"Transporting their heads alone *would* be easier."

At this, the bandits began to wail. Wyatt approached them briskly, sword in hand...

...a sword that was said to be enchanted.

The blade itself faintly glowed with every color of the rainbow, a characteristic exclusive to magical mythrill alloy. Impervious to heat and cold, it was more appropriate to call it a magic-enhanced blade, rather than a magical blade. A blood-red engraving starting from the hilt spidered down the length of the blade, clearly a sigil of some kind. The complex blade combined multiple kinds of sorcery, and was no doubt incredibly rare, if not the only one of its kind.

Wyatt held that very blade up to the neck of one robber, but said, "...No, I don't think I will." The captive, sure he was just about to lose his life, choked out a sigh of relief.

"But why, sir?" asked one of Wyatt's subordinates.

“They may prove useful in that job we spoke of earlier. Riffraff like this will raise less suspicion. We haven’t had anyone this *qualified* come through the Adventurers’ Guild recently.”

“That is true,” the knight replied, as she and her cohort nodded at one another.

Wyatt crouched down in front of the bandit he’d spared so that they were at the same eye level.

“Now then, bandits and gentlemen. Take your pick. Will you become rust for my Sword Eater, here and now? Or will you serve me and live on as new men? You’ll be given money and new names. I won’t force you to choose...but choose quickly. I’m in the worst mood I’ve been in for some time.”

★

“Stop your wiggling, uh... Dw...emon?”

Back in the wagon bed, a white kobold tended to a young dwarf’s wounds. Dwaemon, after initially insisting he was fine, had eventually given in to the force of Fog’s demands.

“Ow ow ow ow ow ow! Slow it down a little, lady!”

“Who’re you calling ‘lady’?! What was it again...Dorae...?”

“Jus’ call me Emon, if ye cannae say it right! Jings, that stings...”

“Man, this kid... You’ll be all done once I put this medicine on, so just hold still a little longer!” From the look on Fog’s face, it was clear she would have preferred to leave Emon behind. It almost looked as though her treatment was so effective, his swelling was already going down. No, in fact, it was no illusion; the young dwarf actually was healing incredibly fast. It seemed he may not have been joking when he said dwarves could even survive a beheading if you stuck the pieces back together.

“Oi, gramps, you were a fancy noble? I’d’ve pegged you for a monk,” Emon said, leaning over the divider between the wagon bed and the driver’s seat.

“Really? Why is that?”

“That mark on yer cheek. It’s not a tattoo, it’s a curse, innit? A spell cast on ye that makes yer bits like they’ve been snipped. Monks all over the world get ’em. But yers is lookin’ proper screwy.”

“That it is. You know quite a lot.”

“The bird that lives five doors over from me, she’s a sorceress. Used to practice her marks all the time on me bum, the bloody witch... Said she had to get ’em just so, else they’re harder to dispel, or the stupid things unravel themselves and turn into a mess. The wee ones at her school used to always make fun of her, called ’em scribbles.”

“The sorcerer that placed this one was also unskilled, I hear. It’s

come to look like a black rose, and I've had no end of teasing over it." Gaius gave a carefree laugh as he scratched the back of his head.

"And you, a baron! That big shot knight looked way more baronly than you."

"Ah, the master of the Adventurers' Guild?"

The man, Wyatt, hadn't given them his full name because he had no last name. Plenty of the common folk had family names, but for a noble to not have one was impossible. No matter the man's stature, that fact alone made it clear that he was of common birth.

Those who aspired to become knights in a region with no academy had two other options. They could join the ranks at an aristocrat's recommendation, or have someone of rank attest to their exceptional ability; Wyatt most likely made knight through the latter.

"...His presence struck me more as that of a soldier. A very capable one."

"How could ye tell?"

"His stance, his walk. And intuition, I suppose."

Emon listened along—whether he understood or not was anyone's guess.

"Ach, who cares 'bout all them fancy-dans?! Even me maw's a princess up north. Ye wouldn't know it now though, lookin' at the fat ol' boot!" He roared with laughter.

"You? The son of a princess? Smells like a big fat lie." Having finished putting away the medical supplies, Fog also drew closer to the driver's seat.

"It's the truth! Dwarves never lie."

"I don't believe that either, coming from you."

"Yer a cruel one..."

Their exchange was like music to Gaius's ears, and it brought a smile to his face.

Chapter 4: Pursuers

After three long months, Darke, a knight with the Bureau of Public Safety, was on her way back to the royal capital of Eaglesclaw.

She'd been working a smuggling case in a port town in the south of Midland, the royal domain. Going undercover, she followed an anonymous tip that a merchant was bringing in illegal dwarven valuables via the eastern nations. For months she'd tailed them, and in the end, she caught them red-handed with... obscene statues and lewd picture books of questionable artistry. Valuables, perhaps, depending on who you asked—but not illegal contraband.

Apparently, a rival merchant had leaked false information about his competitor. Unfortunately for him, the port town's bureau was headed by a clerk with a wicked temper, and he would most likely literally put the screws to that lying merchant.

Naturally, Darke had had no contact with anyone back home while she was undercover, so she had absolutely no way of knowing when Gaius had given up his title and left the capital.

★

The entrance to Gaius's place looked completely different.

"Oh. Long time no see." The person standing in the doorway was a knight even more senior than Gaius, William Kidd. He'd joined the Knights of the Chain two years before Gaius, and had also fought in the Five-Year War, but took a desk job in the royal bureaucracy upon his return. And since he was a senior to Gaius, he was doubly so to Darke.

Despite his peerage, William was good-natured and easygoing even to junior knights, and those who were close to him affectionately called him "Billy." He'd even been kind to Darke, who had been sponging off of Gaius.

William's adorable daughter, Niesse, stood at his elbow.

"It's been a while, Sir Billy," said Darke, "and you're as lovely as ever, Lady Niesse." She patted the young girl on the head. She giggled, clearly enjoying the attention.

"I take it you're here for Gaius?"

"That's right. Where on earth has that crazy old man gone?"

"That guy... He went and quit the Knights. Gave up his rank, too."

"Ahh... That's why he's not here..." Darke slowly nodded, her

expression grim, as if thinking *He's finally done it.*

Gaius had enjoyed the confidence of the prior king, and the king before him had appointed him as a guard to his own daughter, Princess Lula. Igris's current king, however, had been turned against Gaius by the prime minister and his faction. They'd dismissed nearly all of Gaius's subordinates, and turned him into a glorified watchdog. Darke had suspected it would come to this eventually.

"...I get it. So he finally reached his limit. The man was never good at playing politics."

"Yeah, he'd never have won against the prime minister. And you—I asked after you more than once, and got shot down each time by the Public Safety Bureau."

"I couldn't break my cover, Sir. So, where has Gaius moved to?"

"Oh, you know, there's a letter around here somewhere..." After a quick search, Billy handed a letter over to Darke.

"Oh, God," Darke groaned, "his handwriting's as awful as ever." She frowned as she began to decipher the letters.

Dear Darke,

I've quit the Knights and am returning to the countryside.

I'll write you again.

—Gaius

Darke choked out a strange sound, and soon her nose was running heavily.

Billy had never seen her so emotional, and asked with more than a little concern, "Hey now, you okay?"

Niese, too, grew flustered and tried to help out. Standing on her toes, she reached up as high as she could and tried to wipe Darke's runny nose. Such a good child.

"'Succinct' doesn't begin to describe this... It's such an important announcement, and he said it like it was nothing..." For a moment, Darke stood doubled over as Niese kindly wiped her face clean. She stood up with a sigh.

"Well then, I suppose there's no reason for me to hang around here," she grumbled, scratching at the side of her head.

"What, does that mean you're going after him?"

"But of course."

"Hey, hey, think about how that'll make Gaius feel. It's about time you left the nest, already," said Billy, crossing his arms as he spoke his mind. "And wasn't this your childhood dream, graduating from the Academy and becoming a knight?"

“Aha, did I say that?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m afraid that was a lie.”

This time it was Billy’s turn to sputter and rub at his face. Niesse, however, didn’t lift a finger to help him; children can be cold when it came to their parents.

“‘A lie?’ Why, you—”

“I couldn’t care any less about being a silly knight. Truth be told, it was all a big pain, aheh.” Darke snickered with a harsh croaking laugh.

“What the...”

“All right! It sounds like there’s fun to be had elsewhere, so I think it’s about time I call it quits on this knight business.”

“Even if you wanted to, you work for the Public Safety Bureau now. They’re not going to let you just walk out the door.”

“It’ll be fiine. I’ll give them some excuse. I’m quite the gifted liar, you know.” Darke made that strange, frog-like cackle again.

“Well, that’s it for me, then! Now that I know my new address, I’m off! Talk to you again soon, sir!”

Darke pounded a fist to her chest in an overzealous salute, held the pose for no more than a second, then took off at breakneck speed.

Billy was left dumbfounded in her wake, as Niesse enthusiastically waved after her.

...She’d turned in her resignation letter immediately afterward. Naturally, the Bureau rejected it, but that had not bothered Darke in the least—she fled the capital the very same day.

★

“Ye bleedin’ tricked meee!” A tearful cry rang out from the kobold village square, frightening birds into flight from the trees.

The villagers cautiously watched the dwarf, as he screamed on his hands and knees.

“What is it, Emon?” Gaius’s voice called out. The village children had mobbed him as soon as he descended the wagon, turning him into a crawling mass of soft puppy fur.

“Don’t give me that! Ye told me there were loads of cute lasses here! You *lied!*”

“I didn’t lie to you at all. See? Aren’t these children adorable? And that woman over there is quite beautiful.”

“*They’re dogs!*”

“No, they’re kobolds. They’ll bite if you call them that.”

“Ye great big dobber! When I said ‘lasses,’ I meant—you know! Human ones, or ogres, or trolls! I wanted to sneak into some pure, innocent bird’s room tonight and hear her whisper ‘My heart’s racin’,

but as long as it's with you...' before gettin' it on! Or have my first time in a village with a tradition o' older women that show young guys like me how it's done! I wanted to get down n' dirty in a beautiful little town in need of a man to repopulate it! Damn it all!" Still on his knees, Emon pounded his fists against the ground and screamed in frustration. If you ignored the actual words being said, it was a poignant scene of a young man unabashedly expressing his grief.

Gaius seemed to think so; he laughed and said, "I'm glad to see that young people have such active imaginations."

"You're glad, ye—?!" His shout was cut short by a slap to the back of the head from Fog.

"Help me unpack! Since you wanted to stay here so badly, the least you can do is work! You too, Gaius!"

"My apologies. All right, children, time to get down."

"Owww ow ow...alrigh', alrigh'," Emon replied as he rubbed the back of his head. Looking at him now, one would never think that just yesterday, most of the bones in his face had likely been broken. Dwarves recovered frightfully fast.

"I'll get started on dinner after we finish putting everything away, so if you're hungry, you'd best start working fast," Fog warned them, and the pair agreed in unison before quickly getting to work.

After having a good laugh at Emon's tragic performance, the rest of the villagers stepped forward to offer their own help in unloading the wagon.

"So, you're traveling in search of a wife?" asked Fog.

"Aye. When the time comes, dwarf blokes leave the Great Anvil and go on a grand adventure to find our soulmates."

"Ho ho! That's surprisingly romantic," Gaius said with a smile.

"So it is... Nothing wrong with that, though," Fog agreed.

Night had fallen. Fog, Fluff, Amber Blossom, Gaius, and Emon sat around the sunken hearth as they ate a dinner of kobold-style hodgepodge stew, which was called "kobroth." It consisted of whatever meat or vegetables one had on hand, simmered with a traditional fermented seasoning. The dish was a staple in most kobold homes, and because it was so easy to prepare it was the go-to of every busy homemaker.

That's exactly why Fog chose to cook it that night; unloading and sorting out the supplies had taken up most of the afternoon.

"Ye got that right! I'm ready to find me a sweet, gorgeous bride and go to town!"

"...I take it back."

"Go to town'? I don't know what that means, Emon, but it sounds awesome! You're so cool!" cheered Fluff.

“Fluff, I don’t think it means something cool,” Blossom said.

Fluff cocked his head to one side in confusion.

“But just look at me! Dwarf men would never get married if we tried wooin’ ladies the usual way! We got tae go out into the wide world and make a name for ourselves, or go off to battle an’ come home a war hero, somethin’ like that!”

“Talk about impure motives.” Fog wrinkled her nose.

“Take it from me, acting valiantly in combat does not mean the ladies will come running,” Gaius chimed in.

“Y’know, coming from a stodgy old codger like you, that’s actually pretty convincing,” Emon nodded, to which Gaius replied with a bitter smile.

“Anywho, that’s why I cannae be wastin’ me time ’round ’ere. I jus’ know that somewhere out there’s a gorgeous lassie with a chest out to *here* waitin’ fer me. The princess, or warrior, or knight, or nun, or tactician, or dancer of me dreams is awaitin’ the day I light a fire in her heart ’n other parts in our steamy first encounter! I appreciate the hospitality ’n all, but tomorrow I’m headin’ west.”

“Huh? You’re leaving, Brother Emon? Stay and play with us!”

“Sorry, Fluff, but there’s something—an’ someone—I got tae do. Lots of ’em.”

“Aww...”

After watching this exchange, Fog and Gaius turned to each other and shared a chuckle.

★

The next day...

“Come on, play with us, Brother Emon!” cried Fluff.

“Yeah, let’s play!” Blossom cheered. The kids’ tails wagged so hard they threatened to fly off.

“On me way! What d’ye wanna play today, kids?”

“Someone found a huuuge poop in front of the forest. Prolly from a one-horned boar.” With them was Fluff’s best friend Fishbone, snot running freely from his nose as he spoke. “Let’s go and poke it! Yeah, poop!”

“No bleedin’ way! What do ye wanna do that for?!”

“Boo...” the boys whined in unison.

“Alrigh’, alrigh’. How about I teach ye how to play a game called granny-walkin’ instead?”

“What’s that?”

“Sounds funny!”

“Yeah, show us!”

“Right, first the one who’s ‘it’ faces a tree, while everyone else...”

After explaining the rules and giving each child a pat on the head,

Emon turned to leave Fog's hut.

In the end, he'd decided to stay in the village a while longer. For whatever reason, the children naturally adored him; and they especially loved it when he taught them traditional dwarven games.

"Come back before dark," Fog called after them, to which Emon and the children following him replied with an "Okaaay." The other children, having lots of energy and nothing to do, joined the group one by one until they formed a crowd. It seemed Emon had temporarily taken up the role of village babysitter.

★

As the children laughed and enjoyed their game of "granny-walking," the wind carried sounds of a less light-hearted gathering somewhere else in the village.

"What's that?"

"What's goin' on?"

The kids took off running on all fours, their shouting voices all the more child-like in their concern. Emon, who arrived after they did, saw a group of adults that had just returned from a hunt. Together with some of the other villagers, they stood in a circle, gathered around something in the center.

"Did ye catch summat rare?"

"Oh, it's Fog's guest. They caught *something* in their traps, but no one has any idea what to do with it."

"Ooh, let's see..." Now filled with curiosity, Emon moved forward until he was able to see the "prey" they'd caught, which was bound tightly in rope, making noises as it writhed.

It was slightly longer than he was tall, with bright red hair and long, pointed ears. He couldn't tell if it had fangs or not, but its skin was as smooth as that of a young woman's—in fact, it *was* a young woman.

"I am Sashalia Denan! I might be thin and scrawny, but I'm from House Denan, a noble family of warriors! And I'm a former Knight of the Chain! I refuse to be disgraced any further by you filthy beastmen! Kill me!"

"Huh? Kill you?" said one of the members of the hunting party, taken aback by Sashalia's words.

"Eeyaaaah! Don't come near me! I promise I don't taste good! I mean—try anything and I'll bite you! I'll bite you, okay?! I'm warning you, my bites really hurt!" she cried, flailing like a fish on land, her earlier bravado now completely gone. Her even, pleasant features were twisted as she screamed and wailed, her nose running.

"O-Okay, then. I won't do anything," the kobold nodded and backed away, completely cowed by her intensity. The other kobolds

looked at one another, all at a loss as to what they should do with their catch.

Emon pushed his way through the crowd and walked up to her. "What in the—this is a wee *elf*," he said. "What did ye bring her here for?"

As soon as the trapped woman—Sashalia, he remembered her saying—saw him, her face immediately lit up.

"Oh, thank goodness! A person! There's another person here! Hey, hey, can you tell these little guys not to eat me?"

"No one's gonna do that."

"Really?!" In her excitement and relief, it seemed she'd finally started to breathe again.

Fluff followed Emon, his head tilted inquisitively as he pulled at Emon's sleeve. "So if you're not gonna eat her, are you gonna do that thing you said before? 'Get down and dirty'?"

"Nooo! You pervert! Degenerate! Lech! You masher! Filthy wretch! Rotten crotch monster! Just try and lay a finger on me! I'll bite my tongue off and choke to death on my own blood!"

"So... You *do* wanna die?" The kobold from the hunting party, still shaking from Sashalia's earlier tirade, spoke up once again.

"Eeeyaaah! Captaaaain! Save meeeee!" Her screams resumed; it seemed conversation was doing little to clear up the confusion.

"This is really puttin' me off elves," Emon sighed. Behind him, the sound of heavy footsteps grew closer.

"W-Wait a minute, Blossom... I've been in the outhouse this whole time, what could be so urgent?"

"Just hurry up, Uncle! Over here!" When Emon turned around, he saw the large man frantically hoisting up his pants and redoing his belt as the young kobold hurried him on.

"Oh, gramps, yer timin's perfect. The hunters brought back a real piece o' work."

"You know this person, right, Uncle?" said Blossom. "She smells like you, a little bit." Sashalia and Gaius's eyes met.

"Wha—?! Miss Denan?!"

"Ca..." Sashalia sat up lightning-fast and used her legs to drag herself forward, like an incredibly fast inchworm, until she was right in front of Gaius. Her next wail was so loud that it sent the surrounding kobolds running.

"*Captaaaain!*"

"How on earth did you end up here, Miss Denan?" Gaius said as he knelt down. She threw herself forward and buried her face in his chest, knocking her glasses off of her face.

Gaius did not move once as he waited for her tears to stop, occasionally patting her on the shoulder or rubbing her back in an

attempt at being comforting.

It wasn't until a while later that Gaius realized he'd forgotten to wash his hands, at which point he went pale.

★

"My name is Sashalia Denan! I once served as Captain Beldarus's adjutant!"

"Ha ha ha," Gaius chuckled affably. "When I was captain of the guard, Miss Denan was of great help to me as my secretary."

Back at Fog's house, Sashalia, who had regained her composure by now, sat side-by-side with Gaius as she made her introductions.

Inside sat Fog's family; several villagers peeked in from the entryway, filled with curiosity.

"Really?" asked Emon. "A wee li'l quinie like you?"

Sashalia puffed out her cheeks and explained in a huff, "Excuse you, I'm *actually* twenty-three. I just age kinda slowly 'cause I'm half elf."

"Ah, but ye're not just half any elf, ye're half *high* elf, right? I can tell by the ears. Twenty-three to ye's about eleven or twelve in human years."

Elves lived twice as long as humans, and high elves had lifespans four times as long, making Sashalia's rate of maturity roughly the same as that of an average elf. Individual differences and environments meant that some with elf blood tended to take after one side of their family more than the other. Even taking that into account, Sashalia was not nearly old enough by human standards to enlist.

"I know, 'cause me mum's an elf, and a high elf lives in me neighborhood, too."

"High elf...' Miss Denan, I always thought you were simply petite!" Gaius looked back at Sashalia in surprise, which prompted a hasty, flustered objection from the red-headed half-elf.

"N-No, Captain, I'm not a child, sir! I'm a knight—a soldier! I'm a warrior *and* an adult! That's all, no more and no less!"

From her desperate protest and all her gesticulating, it seemed that the last thing she wanted was to be treated like a child by Gaius. Emon attempted to add something in reply, but a wrathful glare from Sashalia quickly shut him up.

"What's a kid like you doing all the way out here?" Fog asked as she held out a cup of boiled water to Sashalia.

"I *said* I'm the Captain's closest adjutant! It's only natural for me to be by his side and support him, if you ask me."

"But Miss Denan, I haven't been your superior officer, or a baron, or a knight, for quite some time now."

“Oh, but that’s not a problem, sir! It’s all right! I left the Knights, too!” Sashalia beamed with confidence, without specifying what exactly was “all right.”

“Whaaat?!” Gaius’s mouth gaped open with surprise, his jaw practically hitting the mat. “But why? You’re from a military family with a rich history, and you were valedictorian of your class at the Academy—you had such a bright future ahead of you!”

“With all due respect, sir, what do you mean?! The only one I serve is my Captain! Not the prime minister or the king!”

No matter what Gaius had to say in response, the glimmer in her eyes as she looked up at him told him his words would fall on deaf ears.

As Fog watched them, a knowing smirk soon spread across her face, as if she’d realized something; the kobold women hovering around the entrance wore similar expressions.

“Reminds me of my youth...me and my dear husband...”

“Aren’t they so sweet?”

“We’re rooting for you, missy!”

It seemed that no matter the race, women tended to enjoy storylines like theirs.

...And so, Sashalia Denan became the third guest to wander into the kobold village.

Naturally, the elder objected yet again. “The dwarf is another matter, but a second half-human is out of the question!” This earned him the collective wrath of the alliance of housewives, considered the strongest faction in the village, and he was quickly silenced.

★

A few days had passed since Sashalia came to the village. Since there was nothing for her to do similar to her previous position as the captain’s aide, she passed the time by helping Fog with errands and chores.

“So we’ve fetched some water, gathered the kindling... What’s next...?” Looking around Fog’s home, Sashalia noticed that Gaius had left some clothes in the corner; he must have changed before joining the hunt going on now.

Oh! I’ll take those back to the lake and wash them! I’ve still got time.

“Hm! Hah! Hm!” She hummed a strange tune to herself as she gathered the discarded clothes and left.

...At least, that was what she’d intended. Instead, Sashalia stood unmoving. Rather, she *couldn’t* move.

“...Th-These are the Captain’s...” She stared at the underwear in her hand before freezing, swallowing hard. With her other hand, she reached into her breast pocket and withdrew a small drawstring

pouch. It contained a single square of cloth—a handkerchief that Gaius had “lost” one day. Ever since the day Sashalia picked it up, she’d carried it close to her heart. To her, it was more precious than any blessed amulet, a shining light that helped her through difficult times. It was her hidden treasure, to a somewhat shameless degree; every so often, she’d hold it to her face and sniff it deeply, a drug she took that filled her with euphoria.

But now, in her hand...she held something even more precious than her secret treasure, a truly legendary piece of equipment.

*The captain’s **actual underwear!*** Sashalia gulped once more.

No, no, no, you can’t! A handkerchief is one thing, but sniffing these...that’s what perverts do! And besides, stealing isn’t something a lady—I mean, it’s not something a knight would do!

But her rationality was powerless to stop her body from acting on its own accord. Her hands brought the underwear up to her face, and her nose inhaled deeply.

Ah...the captain’s natural scent...

She breathed in again. And again.

...stinks!

Sashalia choked. It smelled as bad as one would expect—a mixture of what they call “old man smell” and a rather pungent body odor.

She coughed violently and mumbled, “I really, really shouldn’t have done that,” ...before taking one more quick sniff. Her reason said one thing, but her heart and hands betrayed her.

...She spent quite a while experiencing a total lack of self-control.

After having her fill of that exceptional fragrance, she looked away, satisfied—and there at her feet sat Fluff, looking up at her in curiosity.

“...Did you see all that?”

“Were you sniffing Uncle’s smell, too, Sister Sasha?”

“No. That’s how I measure the level of contamination on a garment, in order to determine the most efficient way to wash it. It’s a very necessary step, okay? This way, I use only the bare minimum of effort required to clean it, so in terms of time and economics, it’s very effective, in other words, by doing this I can conserve precious water while also avoiding wasting any time, and for someone like me, having served in the illustrious Knights of the Chain, under the direct command of the royal family, such behavior is not only expected, but extremely necessary, so in conclusion, I’m not doing anything creepy, okay?”

Sashalia’s defense came out in a jumbled rush of words, but Fluff, sitting at her feet with his head tilted to one side, did not appear to have understood any of it. It was only natural, since Sashalia herself

did not quite know what she had been going on about.

“Sometimes I sniff his clothes, too. They really stink, huh!” Fluff giggled, like children do.

“Huh? O-Oh, yeah.”

“They stink, right?”

“Y-Yeah...they do. I think. They do stink. Aha-ha-ha...” Sashalia laughed dryly, pretending to agree with him. After their bonding session, Fluff’s ears pricked up and he turned away from Sashalia.

“I hear lots of footsteps! Uncle and the others are back from hunting! They’re real close!”

“R-Really? Well then, why don’t I just wash these tomorrow? Oho ho ho!”

Fluff responded with an enthusiastic nod before dashing out of the house.

I did it...I managed to trick him... She breathed a huge sigh in relief.

“Uncle! Mommy! You’re back!”

“Hiya, Fluff. Your mother caught a one-horned boar today!”

“Wow!”

“Heh, man, these weapons Gaius got us slice through stuff like a dream.”

Gaius and Fog’s voices were audible through the walls of the house. It sounded as though their hunt had gone well.

Just as Sashalia was on her way out of the house to greet them—

“Hey, Uncle, guess what? Sister Sasha thinks you stink, too!”

—she fell spectacularly on her face.

★

“All right, the meat’s all cooked...hm? Emon, where’s Gaius gone off to?”

“Oh, he went down tae the lake to have a himself a bath.”

“Huh? Now? But the water’s so cold.”

“Who knows? All’s I know’s ’e looked real glum.”

“Again? Ah, well, let’s go ahead and eat. Go on then, missy, that one’s already cooked, so go ahead and grab it before it burns.”

“Aha, ahaha...ha... Yes, thank you...” The former knight, who was the cause of Gaius’s depression, laughed weakly as she shakily reached out for a skewer.

★

Snap! A dry sound rang out as a wooden stick fell to the floor. A small figure rushed forward and held a stick against the young dwarf’s throat, even as his own stick was still falling to a clattering halt.

“That’s enough!” Gaius called out, at which Sashalia released her

prey.

“Emon, it’s only natural that you’re a lesser fighter than me,” she sighed.

“Cause ye’ve been bloody trained in combat!” Emon snapped back, cradling his numb hand.

“Excuse you? I’m your elder, so watch how you speak to me, boy.” She punctuated her retort by tapping his head lightly with her wooden stick. “I think it’ll be kinda tough to become a great hero king, seeing as how you just lost a swordfight to a ‘wee li’l quinie.”

“Grr...” Indeed, the two former knights were teaching Emon how to wield a sword.

“Oi, gramps. Ye got any tricks on how tae get tougher? Any secret special moves?”

Gaius shook his head, laughing, and told him he didn’t. “You know, Emon, the western kingdoms you’re so keen to get to are much more dangerous. No major conflicts have happened around here for a few years now, but the west is in a near constant state of war.”

“...I know that already. Tha’s why I’m tryin’ tae toughen up now,” he huffed, his cheeks puffing indignantly.

“It will be a challenge to earn fame with the skills you have now. You *were* nearly killed by a group of bandits, after all.”

Emon winced.

“Very well, then,” Gaius continued. “Why don’t we train a little? At least until you’re vomiting blood.”

“‘Vomiting blood’?!”

“Ha ha ha. That’s right. Just like I used to, back in the day. Miss Denan never once took a day off in her training.” The men, like the conversation, both turned toward Sashalia, and she started in surprise. “Huh? What is it?”

As Gaius had said, Sashalia had tirelessly continued to train and study even after joining the Knights of the Chain, seeking to hone her other abilities and make up for her great lack of physical size and strength. In the process, she’d read through every last document and book in the royal library and military archives. Her carefree youth, her free time—she’d spent them all so that she could one day be useful to Gaius. So that she could stand by his side. So that she could repay the one who had given her hope. That was why she’d been willing to throw everything else away.

Naturally, Sashalia had never revealed any of this to Gaius. Quite the opposite—even when her body and hands were in pain, she did her utmost to never let it show. Without any close friends, she’d never had anyone to open up to, and so she was very surprised that Gaius knew.

“Look at her palms and you’ll see. She most likely got those

callouses by practicing with a sword for far too long. It looks like she's been slacking a bit lately, though, ha ha."

Sashalia's nose grew warm and began to burn, and she turned her face away. If she were to make eye contact again, she would most likely start to cry.

"You need to apply yourself, as well. Combining proper technique with your natural strength would make you a fine swordsman."

"How long will that take?"

"Let's see... How about this: we'll spar ten rounds, and if you can best me once, you'll be ready to go."

"Aye, let's do it! That won't take much time at all!"

"Indeed, it won't." The two of them laughed.

With her back still turned to them, Sashalia sat sniffing. "That'll take *years*..." she said under her breath, shivering at the thought.

*

As the group sat around Fog's hearth after dinner, idle conversation turned into lively discussion as they talked about current events.

"A supply run?"

"That's right," Fog replied. "Just about everyone's been asking when we're planning to go again."

Fog and Gaius had made four trips into Ryburgh by now. The villagers had come around to the idea of using human-made tools, and Red Eye and Rain Grass had accompanied them on the last excursion.

"So this time it'll be me, Gaius, and Emon..."

"I'm coming, too!" Sashalia's exclaimed.

Fog smiled knowingly. "Reeeally? You don't haaave to, you know?"

"No, it's only natural that I, Sashalia Denan, adjutant to the captain, accompany him! And besides, as a secretary, management of the budget and goods is my specialty! Who else could assist you better than I could?!" Her arms were crossed, so excited she was breathing heavily.

"All right, already. You're coming with us, then. That okay with you, Gaius?"

"Hm? Ah, I apologize. I wasn't listening." Gaius looked up from what had previously been taking up his full attention—bouncing Fluff and Blossom around on his knees—to reply, though it made him look quite dense.

"Ugh, Gaius... You really are something else. Hey, missy, you really took orders from *this* dopey blockhead? I bet you had your hands full taking care of him."

"I...cannot deny that." Gaius rubbed the back of his head, and the

children sitting on his lap copied him.

“But that’s not true!” Sashalia, on the other hand, did deny it vehemently. Fog enjoyed seeing her so irritated, and continued to prod her.

“I bet the big oaf doesn’t even remember what we had for dinner last night.”

“And I bet he does!”

“Yeah? Okay, then—hey, Gaius! What was last night’s dinner?”

“...Hm?” Gaius rubbed his chin in thought. “Ah, er...kobroth, wasn’t it?”

“No. I stir-fried some tree-eating lizard meat.”

Gaius winced, as the working mother flashed Sashalia a victorious smirk.

“So you worked with him and didn’t even realize how hopeless he is, huh?”

“Huh?! Excuse you?! For your information, I’ve known the captain for way longer than you have! As his aide, I know how hopeless he is in all sorts of ways, and I don’t mind!”

“Oh, really?” Fog snorted. This push-back from Sashalia now genuinely made her mad.

“Yes, really! Did you know that the captain could never remember the proper procedure for filling out forms, so I’d have to rewrite them every time? And that he’d always forget the deadlines to submit reports to the castle? Or the way his desk was such a mess that he’d always lose his seal, and everything else, and had to spend ages looking for them? Or how if I didn’t go to meetings with him he’d never manage to hang onto any documents? Or that he never read the manual for any equipment and would end up using them incorrectly? Or that he’d just wander into random shops and buy weird things because he thought they’d come in handy someday? And that he’d buy the same things over and over again because he’d forget he already had them? Or the time he was depressed for a full month because he found out he was the ‘demon’ in a song all the children were singing? Or how once, a young knight called the captain ‘Dude,’ and even though he had to reprimand her, he was secretly happy about it? Or did you know that he once wanted to take candy to an orphanage, but bought lots of animal treats instead on accident? And how it was such a hot day that they melted? And then he cried because he couldn’t give them to the children? Or that he and cats...”

“U-Uh. Okay, so you do know some stuff. But now it’s *my* turn—”

“Hey, lady!” Emon hissed, breaking his silence to interrupt them.

“What, Emon?! This is important!” Sashalia snapped at him.

“Yeah!” Fog agreed. “Little boys should mind their own business!”

Emon sighed deeply and jabbed a thumb over in Gaius’s direction.

“Might wanna cut it out. Gramps looks like he’s two seconds from bawlin’ his eyes out.”

★

Back in Ryburgh, at a certain smithy, the master of the forge was speaking with a mountain of a man. His apprentices, who would usually be toiling away with enthusiasm, were nowhere to be seen; they’d fled into the back of the workshop at the sight of the foreboding customer. This time, he was accompanied by a young woman with a hood pulled low over her eyes. The head blacksmith was rather doubtful of her and her unassuming appearance, but the matter at hand was more important than getting her story. He only allowed himself a small sigh in disapproval before turning his attention to the other customer.

“Got your order all ready, boss. I’ll send them to your lodgings, as usual.” He set a spearhead and a sword before the customer, samples from the latest batch. The man picked up both small items and turned them over in his hands.

“Very nicely made. I daresay you’re a finer smith than any in the capital.”

“Aw, now that warms my old heart. By the way...” the blacksmith looked over at the young woman that stood close beside his customer. “All these small weapons—are they for this little lady to use?”

“Her? Oh, no. They’re for even smaller hands.”

“Say what...?” said the blacksmith, stunned. “You’re forcing a bunch of little’uns to fight?”

“Oh, no, they all *want* to. They’ll make fine warriors.”

“That—That’s inhuman!” Even though he believed the man to be in a seedy line of business, this was well beyond anything he had expected.

“Ha, ha, ha. Well, it’s a good thing there are no humans involved.”

A voice echoed in the blacksmith’s mind: *The man’s a demon. A bonafide resident of the underworld.* He felt the strength start to leave his legs, and practically collapsed into a chair.

“I’ll be awaiting the rest at the lodge. I look forward to doing business with you again.”

“A-Ah...” The blacksmith, however, was in another world. As the large man and his companion left the workshop, he remained slumped over in his seat.

...Eventually, he arose on trembling legs. He made his way into the kitchen, withdrew a bottle and a cup, and poured himself a large measure of alcohol. Realizing the customers had left, his apprentices peeked into the workshop.

“What happened, boss? Why’re you drinking all of a sudden?” The

blacksmith, however, only replied with a glare and emptied the cup a second time.

“Workin’ a smithy means gettin’ blood on your hands...”

“Um...”

“But you know what? I... I gotta keep hammerin’ that iron!”

“Huh?”

“Even if a demon walks through that door, I’ll make him the knives he needs to kill! ’Cause I’m no saint myself, far from it! This is what I was born to do.” His apprentices could only tilt their heads and mutter non-committal noises in response.

★

Their business concluded, Gaius and Sashalia made their way back to the inn where Emon and Fog would be waiting for them.

Emon had asked them to show him “the lewdest shops in town,” but a blow from Sashalia had cut that conversation short; he was now stuck holding down the fort and Fog was tasked with keeping an eye on him.

“Excellent. Now we’ll have enough spears for everyone who wants to hunt.”

“More importantly, sir, that blacksmith completely misunderstood you!”

“Did he, now?” The fact that he had to ask made Sashalia sigh in exasperation.

“Please be more careful, Captain. People tend to get the wrong idea about you. A lot.”

“About that, Miss Denan...”

“Yes, Captain?”

Running a hand over his unshaven jaw, Gaius looked down at Sashalia, who was gazing intently up at him.

“I’m no longer captain of the Knights, so I’d prefer it if you didn’t call me that anymore.”

“Oh, of course! I understand!”

“Right, so just Beldar...”

“I’ll call you Sir Gaius!”

“I-I’m sorry?”

“And you can just call me ‘Sashalia’ from now on!”

“Wha...?”

“Yes!” Sashalia whispered with a mighty pump of her fist.

“Why are you celebrating?”

“N-No reason! Emon and Fog have waited long enough, don’t you think? Let’s hurry back, Sir Gaius!” And with that, the half-elf turned on her heel and walked ahead.

“All right then, er, Miss Sashalia.”

“Yes!”

Gaius was still had no idea what had just happened, but he decided to let the matter rest since Sashalia was in such a good mood.

★

A merchant was pulling up to the lodge just as they arrived, delivering goods they'd purchased from another shop. Gaius showed the merchant to his own wagon, and Sashalia headed for their room as the men began loading the goods.

And just like that, we went from boss and subordinate to being on a first-name basis! Oho ho ho hmm ho! Humming, she skipped up the stairs, where Emon stood waiting at the door; it seemed he'd been eagerly awaiting the sound of their return.

“Sashalia! There's someone 'ere what says she knows the old man. She's been waitin' for 'im.”

“She knows him?”

Emon continued in a whisper. “Aye, and she's practically drippin' with a real...indecent energy.”

“Huh? And your hormones aren't driving you crazy? Wait, nevermind that—you can't just be letting people into our room.”

Sashalia kept one hand on the hilt of her sword as she entered, just in case. Once inside, she was greeted by the sight of a swordswoman sitting in one of the room's chairs.

Her skin was pale as death. She wore a soft cap with a bill, and her hair, black as midnight, stopped at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were the same jet-black color as her hair, and the circles under her eyes were almost painfully dark.

Her ample curves were impossible to miss, however, even under the men's clothing she was wearing. While the word “beautiful” never seemed to quite fit her, the discrepancy of her unhealthy pallor and voluptuous figure nevertheless gave her an alluring and lascivious air.

Sashalia had seen this woman before—many, many times.

“...Darke?!”

The swordswoman's name was Darke. She and Sashalia had been in the same year at the Royal Knight's Academy, and they had both been members of the Knights of the Chain at the same time. Sashalia had never known what to make of her, though; it was impossible to tell what she was thinking behind that aloof demeanor.

“Oh my my my, long time no see, Madame Adjutant! I don't think I've had the pleasure of your acquaintance since you were transferred out of the Knights, have I?” Darke cackled like a croaking frog as she stood. With a huge, exaggerated movement, she thumped a fist against her chest in a salute before sticking her hand out for Sashalia to shake.

“Oh, I, I think so...but why are you even here?!” Sashalia was so

confused that she didn't know how else to react but shake the hand offered to her. Darke, on the other hand, did not answer the question.

"Lady Sashalia, I heard *someone* left the royal bureaucracy...and as soon as I did, I knew why. You went after the captain, didn't you? Goodness gracious me, there is simply no stopping a maiden in love!" She gave that peculiar laugh again.

"Who's—! What are you talking about?! Are you crazy?! Don't be ridiculous!"

"Oho! This is the part where you go beet-red and deny it! It's so very adorable!"

Sashalia couldn't even begin to deny Darke's description of her face, as she knew it was spot-on. She stamped her feet in frustration.

"Just answer my question! You work for the Public Safety Bureau! What in the world are you even *doing* here?!"

"Ah, about that, you see..."

She was interrupted by the sound of the door opening.

"Come now, keep it down in here. You'll disturb the other guests." Gaius entered the room, looked around—and made a small sound of surprise.

"Oh, Sir Gaius. I really can't tell why, but Darke..." Sashalia began an attempt to explain the situation, but Darke cut her off by briskly walking in front of the young half-elf and in a sickeningly sweet, coquettish voice, cried:

"Faaatheer—I!"

Sashalia choked in shock, and half of her nose began to run. The moment she saw Darke embrace Gaius affectionately, the other side of her nose also began gushing profusely, and she found it impossible to stem the flow.

"Oh? Does that mean you've come around?" Gaius asked as he peeled Darke off of himself.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You *know* what—the matter of your adoption."

"Oh, *that*..."

"Yes. That."

"I don't wanna."

"Then why did you...?"

"Call you 'father' just now? I just wanted to tease you a little." Darke turned her head just enough to shoot Sashalia a sidelong glance as she laughed her croaking laugh.

"You never change, do you? Honestly..." Gaius's shoulders slumped as he heaved a sigh. He'd suspected she was only poking fun, but Sashalia knew who Darke's real target had been. Gaius, on the other hand, remained completely oblivious and instead went on to introduce the women as if they had never met before.

“I apologize for the late introduction. Miss Sashalia, I’m sure I don’t need to introduce her to you, but everyone else, this is Darke. She used to loaf around in my home during her time at the Knight’s Academy. For a brief time, we were fellow knights, but she now works for the Public Safety...Bureau... Say, why *are* you here?”

“Becaaaause I quit. It bored me.”

“You did *what?!* ” Gaius’s high-pitched shout was practically hysterical.

“And so, since I no longer have a place to stay, I’d just love it if you would look after me, Faaather.” She twisted her shoulders back and forth as she drew out the last word in a singsong and traced circles against Gaius’s chest with a finger.

“If I knew it was going to come to this, I would have just found you someone to marry.”

“And become a housewife? *I never* would have bothered with all that!” Darke cackled raucously as she slapped Gaius on the back.

As if waiting for the right time to cut in, Fog, who had been curled up on the bed, gave a great big stretch. “Ahh, time to relax. If you’re like a daughter to Gaius, then I don’t need to pretend to be a dog anymore.”

“Woah! Your dog talks?!”

Gaius chuckled. “Her name is Fog, and she’s a kobold. She’s allowed me to stay in her home for the time being.”

“Well, I’ll be. Has *my* Gaius been causing you some trouble?” She made sure to emphasize their pseudo-familial relation. Sashalia’s cheek twitched.

“So ye’re not blood? No wonder—I thought ye were far too sexy tae be related tae the old man.”

“Ah, and I’ve already made this young man’s acquaintance. A dwarf from Asshole Mountain, was it...?”

“Excuse me, it’s ‘*The Great Asshole!*’” Emon said proudly. “No, hang on...” He cupped his hand in his chin as he attempted to work through what had just been said, but Darke paid him no more mind. She swiveled around to survey the room before bobbing her head in a quick nod. She smiled at everyone—and whether she meant to or not, her drooping eyes and the way her lips were curled created a depraved expression. It was difficult to imagine someone like her under Gaius’s care.

“I, Darke, will be accompanying you from now on. I do so look forward to it.”

★

“M-Madame Adjutant! Wait just a moment, if you would!”
The group had rented another room, as there were no more

available beds, and it was into this second room that Sashalia dragged Darke. Breathing heavily, she slammed the door shut behind them and turned the lock so firmly that the sound filled the room.

“Darke, where on *earth* did all this come from?!”

“Whatever do you mean?” She smiled sweetly and seductively. Sashalia wasn’t used to being smiled at like this—but this was no time to get flustered.

“You know! All that about you living in Sir Gaius’s home! And possibly being his adopted daughter! When we were in the Academy, and in the Knights of the Chain, you never told me about any of that!”

“Oh, come now. We weren’t what you would call the best of friends, now were we? When we joined the Knights, I was under very, very *strict* orders from Sir Gaius: ‘Don’t tell a soul that I’m your guardian! Everything between us has to be completely professional while we’re on the job!’”

Darke did have a point; the two had hardly spoken in school, and Sashalia’s only impression of her was of a pale classmate lurking in a corner, that unusual grin always on her face.

And she knew Gaius. He would never have allowed personal affairs to interfere with his work. It made complete sense that he wouldn’t give her special treatment despite their relationship. In fact, Sashalia now realized, he even seemed to treat Darke just a little more coldly than the other knights under his command.

“B-But how did you track him down?”

“Surely the same way you did, Madame? I knew where his hometown was, so I did a little sleuthing here and there. All I had to do was ask about ‘a terrifyingly large brute of a man’ before the stories started rolling in—none of them mentioned the name ‘Beldarus,’ but even so, it was immediately obvious. And so I’ve been lying in wait here, knowing he’d need to come to town to do some shopping.”

Once again, Darke was right. Sashalia had followed his trail in much the same way. There was a difference, though: Sashalia had made it to the site of Gaius’s former home and found the tracks from his wagon, which had spurred her to continue following him. After they’d been reunited, Gaius had scolded her about the dangers of entering the Greatwood, even just its outskirts.

Darke continued her onslaught, watching Sashalia with a broad grin. “Sooo... ‘Miss Sashalia’ and ‘Sir Gaius’—I take my eyes off of you for one minute, and suddenly you’re on a first-name basis!”

“W-Well, he isn’t my commanding officer anymore, so why can’t we use our names with each other? Which reminds me, you need to stop calling me ‘Madame Adjutant!’”

“Would you prefer ‘Mrs. Gaius’s Stalker’? Oh, if I do decide to

allow Sir Gaius to adopt me, I could call you ‘Mother Dearest!’ Wouldn’t that be a laugh! Maybe I will after all, if only for that. Ooh, I think I’ll head over to his room now and seal the deal!”

“No, no, no! Why me and Sir Gaius?!” With burning red cheeks, Sashalia flung out her arms and did her best to block Darke’s path, darting left and right.

“Aaah...but everyone knows about Lady Denan’s undying love for the captain. Everyone but the man himself, that is.”

“Huh?!”

“And I do mean *everyone*. The other knights, the recruits that joined after us, the students from the Sorcerer’s Academy who were visiting on research, the merchants passing through, even the women of the street corners—everyone knew it, everyone saw it, and everyone was in agreement about what it was!”

“You’re kidding me!” Sashalia dropped to the floor in a crouch, her hands pressed against her head. She grabbed fistfuls of her hair and yanked on them, exposing her wide forehead; this habit had earned her the nickname “Little Miss Forehead,” whispered behind her back among the knights.

“So when I heard about how you’d found Sir Gaius, I understood why right away. You know, for quite some time now, I’ve thought you would make a fine partner for him.”

“Wha...?” Sashalia lifted her face, her hands still in her hair.

“After all, Lady Denan, you’re of such noble birth. Even without a court rank, House Denan boasts a gallant history of decorated soldiers! And on top of that, you yourself are quite the scholar—you graduated second in our class, after all. You do still look quite immature, to be sure, but anyone with eyes can see you’re going to be an exquisite beauty! In just a few years, you’ll make a breathtaking bride, I just know it.”

Sashalia scowled—this time not at Darke’s teasing, but at the mention of her family.

“The only reason I was adopted was as insurance. After their son passed away, the Denan family needed an heir, but I’m an illegitimate child—and a half-breed, too. Once my adoptive mother had another child, I wasn’t needed anymore, so they shut me away in the academy. I’m hardly a Denan, really.”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that you’re of noble lineage! And what does it matter that you’re of elf blood? Why, Sir Gaius’s mother is half troll herself! You were both brought into honorable households, as well—such similarly beautiful stories!”

“...I knew that already.”

Gaius was the illegitimate child of the Earl of Grenwyk, of House Bargylus, and a half-troll female knight. After his mother’s death,

House Bargylus had taken him in for a short while, but his father passed away soon after. In the ensuing disputes regarding inheritance, Gaius, as an illegitimate child, was banished; it wasn't until long after that the royal couple had rescued him. "Beldarus" was the name of a long-dead branch of House Bargylus. The previous king had gifted Gaius with the surname as a reward for his acts of valor in the war.

"Pedigree! Intelligence! Beauty! All present and accounted for! And your heart is already his! I ask you, Lady Denan, could the situation be any more perfect?" Darke nodded in agreement with herself, arms crossed and one hand on her chin.

Sashalia simply stared at her for a while before her dispirited reply. "...Never mind that. What about you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Sashalia recalled the image of Darke clinging to Gaius, her finger trailing against his broad chest... Her cheeks flushed and her voice grew louder. "You keep saying 'adoption' this and 'daughter' that, but that's not what you're after, is it?"

"Ah? Hm—*ah*. Aha ha. Ha ha *haaa*. You needn't worry about a thing, Lady Denan."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"We aren't in direct competition, is what it means. Quite the opposite, really: we can work together."

"And by that, you're saying...?"

"Lady Denan, your ultimate goal is to become Sir Gaius's wife, yes?"

"I don't—that's—I only respect him! As one knight to another!"

"Ha! If you insist. That particular assignment is not something I have my mind on."

"Assignment?"

"So I do hope you can relax, as far as that's concerned."

"Relax?"

"What I'm after...is Sir Gaius's virtue."

"V-Virtue?"

"And so we're both aware, I'm saying that he has never had any carnal knowledge whatsoever."

"I-I-I know what the *word* means!" Sashalia sprang back to her feet, her face beet-red and her voice painfully shrill.

"Ha ha ha. Please, Lady Denan, do keep your voice down. The others will start to worry," Darke cooed, her hands outstretched as though pacifying a startled horse. "That is why I propose a plan: the two of us will catch Sir Gaius in a trap!"

"A trap...?"

"Bind him up tight!"

"Bind him...?"

“Undo his magic seal of castration!”

“Undo...?”

“And after I’m through with him...”

“Through...?”

“You confess your love to him without delay!”

“Confess...?”

“And once I have thoroughly robbed him of his purity, the two of you are free to begin the rest of your lives in joyous matrimony.”

“Matrimony...?”

Darke took Sashalia’s hands in her own and made them applaud. *Clap, clap, clap.*

“—That’s never going to happen! I’ll never *allow* it to happen!!”

“No? You don’t like it? Aw, and I thought it was such a fine idea...all I ever studied in school was how to undo that spell.”

“So that’s why you were so close with the students from the Sorcerer’s Academy...” Sashalia heaved a sigh, as though exhausted. Darke, on the other hand, laughed brightly as she scratched the back of her head.

Sashalia had seen that gesture many times when they were classmates, but it was only then that she realized: Darke must have picked it up from Gaius.

“As long as I can be Sir Gaius’s first, I will be satisfied. With that as my only condition, I humbly pledge to you my assistance,” Darke said, another sly grin spreading across her face. This time, however, the look in her eyes sent a chill down Sashalia’s spine.

“I *will* be the one to pluck that black rose.”

★

A flurry of distressed clucks rang out from the covered wagon. They came from cages that housed a small flock of chickens that they’d purchased in Ryburgh. In the crowded wagon bed, Darke and Emon sat practically face-to-face as they spoke, and the chickens behaved as though they couldn’t stand listening to the conversation any longer.

It was Sashalia who had realized the kobold village was supported solely by agriculture and hunting; they had no tradition of raising livestock, and so she’d suggested purchasing some chickens. They were relatively easy and inexpensive to raise, since they foraged for their own food. And above all else, they were the one breed of livestock that the kobolds could manage, given their size. Their eggs, while not enough to sustain the village, would still be a welcome addition to the food supply.

“...Ye know, sometimes me nethers itch so bad it does me ’ead in. They get this nasty red rash, and I think I seen pus down there once.”

“You don’t say?!”

“I got a li’l worried and did some readin’—it sounds a lot like somethin’ you’d get off a seedy wench or somethin’.”

“My, what a scholar you are!”

“I know I don’t look it, but I’ve actually never been wit’ a lady before. How’d a virgin catch somethin’ like that?!”

“Now, now, don’t fret. In all the world, there is nothing more splendid than an unplucked flower. You should be pleased with that!”

“I’m wonderin’, though, what if one o’ those dream demons got her ’ands on me? Ye know, a ‘suckybus’? They’re out there, right?”

“I’ve never seen or met one before, but I have heard the legends.” Tales did abound of several kinds of low-level demons said to visit people at night and take advantage of them; succubi are the female variety of that sort of demon.

“I’ve done me research and come tae a conclusion: one night, a suckybus must’ve done all kinds a’ nasty things tae me and gave me the itch wit’out me realizin’. And *that* means that I’ve actually already ’ad me first time, I just didn’t know it!”

“You have quite an active imagination, Emon,” Gaius chuckled as he drove the wagon.

“Don’t listen, Sir Gaius! If you get involved with those idiots, you’ll catch their stupidity!” Sashalia chided from beside him on the driver’s bench. Fog slept soundly in her lap.

“Ye don’t have tae be so mean! I’m serious!”

“That’s even worse!”

“Come on, now! Tell this li’l elfin lass to stop, sis!” he pleaded to Darke; it seemed that she’d won him over and earned herself the position of “older sister” in his eyes.

“Calm down, Emon.”

“But...”

“First of all, I regret to inform you that your theory is off the mark.”

“Why do you *regret* that?!” Sashalia shouted.

“There certainly are many venereal diseases that exhibit those symptoms. But the unhygienic conditions of life on the road are a more likely culprit. If left unchecked, accumulated dirt can cause disease-like symptoms. Isn’t that right, Sir Gaius?”

“Now that you mention it, we rarely bathed during the war. I myself once got rather—”

“Stop it, Darke! Don’t drag Sir Gaius into your filthy conversation!”

“Ooh, Lady Denan, you’re so very strict.”

“No, you’re just going too far!” Sashalia bristled as she shot back a reply.

Emon, the topic of the conversation, now looked incredibly crestfallen. His head hung listlessly. "So that mean's I'm...I'm..."

"Still chaste, unfortunately for you. Might I suggest washing up daily from now on? Be sure to scrub until it sparkles, especially after use! That's crucial."

"...Alright', sis, then that's what I'll do! Every day!"

"Indeed. So very glad you understand." Darke smiled gently back at him. She was the very picture of a kind mentor, gently dispensing life wisdom to a young man...as long as one ignored the subject matter.

Sashalia, on the other hand, grumbled, "Honestly, I wish you two would just fall off the wagon, already..."

"Crivens, if I'd've known that, I woudn'ta used so much of my medicine..." Emon sighed.

"Medicine?" Darke tilted her head inquisitively.

Emon reached between the chicken cages to grab his bag, prompting a fresh wave of noisy clucking. He withdrew a small bottle and held it up to show the small amount of red liquid remaining. "This here's magic medicine I brought from home."

"Oh, is it a secret dwarven concoction?"

"Aye. It works on most anythin', whether ye drink it or rub it right onto yer wounds. Yer flesh'll start healin' up before yer very eyes."

"Oho? This liquid can do all that?"

Healing magic was not unheard of, but it did not usually have so many applications. Nor did everyone who had learned the magical arts know spells that could heal wounds and staunch the flow of blood. Such sorcery could only be wielded by certain, especially skilled casters, particularly when it came to internal injuries and illnesses, which were all the more difficult to treat. In such cases, magic alone was not enough; one needed suitable facilities as well as a working knowledge of medical science to deal with the complexities of the living body.

If this was not another of Emon's boasts, it would mean that the liquid's puissance was far more powerful than the work of sorcerers who "merely" manipulated magical elements and energies. It would also make dwarves the keepers of a priceless technology that reached into the mysterious realms of true magic, one never before seen in human lands.

"It's true, I swear on me mum! I told ye dwarves don't lie! Jus' a wee bit o' this on the ol' rash and all the festerin' stops."

Sashalia couldn't help but blurt out, "Do you know how valuable that is? And you've been using it...down there?!"

"I suppose it does make sense to apply a secret medicine to one's secret areas," Darke quipped.

“Wipe that look off your face!” Sashalia scolded Darke, who was indeed wearing a self-satisfied “I’ve just said something incredibly profound” smirk.

Just then, Fog’s eyes suddenly flew open. “What’s that...?”

“Oh, Fog,” Sashalia looked down at her. “I’m sorry we woke you!”

“Nah, you’re no worse than the ruckus I deal with at home. I don’t mean that.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Something stinks.”

Emon bent over to inspect his crotch, but Fog did not even notice the misunderstanding. Instead, she looked up at Gaius and whispered to him.

“I smell fire and smoke...and burning flesh.”

Chapter 5: Dark Clouds

“It’s coming from over there,” said Fog, pointing. Gaius brought the wagon to a halt, and everyone got out. They were now close enough to see what Fog had been smelling: thick, black columns of smoke rose from behind a thicket of trees.

“Maybe a farmer started a controlled burn, to clear away crop residue?” Sashalia suggested. “But Fog said she smelled ‘living things,’ too...”

“Ah—” Darke started.

“What’s wrong?” Sashalia asked; the woman’s usual dreamy smile was gone.

“That smoke...it’s the sort made by burning houses. I’ve seen it several times, a long, looong time ago.” Her tone held the same playful lilt it always did, as though she was telling a joke—but something else burned behind her eyes as she stared at the smoke in the distance. She looked as though the sight of it was a source of frustration.

Sashalia was reminded that she knew nothing of Darke’s past. From the looks of her eyes, however, it was clear that *something* had happened to her, presumably during the Five-Year War. The eastern kingdom in which Sashalia had lived had been uninvolved, but unfortunately, it looked like her fellow former knight had learned first-hand about the flames of war.

At this realization, Sashalia found it difficult to reply to Darke, and instead turned toward Gaius—and what she saw in his face made her breath catch in her throat.

Gaius wore a look of pure rage. His eyes were wide, and he was biting his lip so hard it threatened to draw blood. The man’s fury was so intense that she half-expected steam to start rising from him as his burning eyes stared at the smoke. Gaius quickly withdrew his trusty faussar from the wagon bed, and with a meaningful look over at Darke, he took off in a fierce sprint as though launched from a catapult.

The rest of the group was left stunned, and by the time they pulled themselves together Gaius had receded into a figure in the distance. Emon grabbed a sword as well and whistled shrilly before running after him.

“Those damn idiots...!” Fog growled. “Men never stop and think!

I'm going, too!"

"Stop, Emon! Please wait, Fog!" Sashalia cried. Unsure of what to do, she began to draw her weapon as well before Darke held out a hand to stop her.

"Not you. Sir Gaius ordered me to protect you."

"When did he say that?!"

"He didn't have to. It was in his eyes."

"His eyes...that's not enough for me to—"

"Please try to understand." Darke's firm voice was unusually serious, which took Sashalia by surprise. She began to protest out of habit but caught herself, and her shoulders slumped in defeat.

I get it...I'd only slow him down...

★

—What a pathetic excuse for a village.

The ruler of a given area will usually order settlements to build a pub or an inn when they get big enough, but this flyspeck is nowhere near that point. There couldn't even be twenty people living here—no, make it twenty-two, if you count those two women my lackeys have cornered over there.

These were the thoughts of Roche McArdle, a young knight, as he lounged on his soft seat. His perch was not a chair or sofa, but the corpse of a man he'd slain not moments before lain atop the body of another dead man, to provide a high enough surface for him to sit more comfortably.

"Shouldn't be a problem if I kill off this whole village," he muttered under his breath as he rested his chin against his hand. The decision made, he waited for the scene before him to end—not out of any sort of conscience, but because he simply wanted nothing to do with these peasant women who reeked of dirt.

And besides, leaving a few survivors as witnesses is part of the job, so it's fine if some of them manage to escape. He sighed and took a swig from a bottle of alcohol he'd looted.

Nothing about the man's posture held any trace of alertness or wariness. Considering that most of the residents had already been slain and he was nearly finished in burning down the settlement, this was to be expected. Nothing and no one in the surrounding area could do anything to stop him, and no traveling merchant would stop to inspect the cause of the smoke. Groups were tasked with keeping the peace as they patrolled the region, and normally an incident like this would catch their eye. This time, however, McArdle was not the least bit concerned about being caught by them.

Why not? The answer was simple: because he *was* one of them.

This stuff is terrible, he thought as he took another gulp.

One of McArdle's underlings, a man clad in armor, emerged from one of the burning homes. While his equipment made him look somewhat capable, his dull, vulgar face made it clear that he was lacking in intelligence, culture, and common sense. That ugliness, inside and out, was why McArdle didn't think of them as "his men" so much as "his minions."

The man held a young boy by the wrist dragging him along the ground as he walked. The boy had taken several blows to the head; it was swollen and sunken slightly in one spot, like a bruised grape. McArdle couldn't tell if the lad was breathing, but even if he was, it was clear he wasn't long for this world.

"Eheh heh heh, found this'un hidin' in the oven, even though 'es already dead either way."

"Really."

"Had some fun hittin' 'im, couldn't do that if he got burned up."

"That's true."

"Oh, but I can have some more fun now, right?"

"I don't care. Just do it somewhere I can't see it."

"Aye aye!" With a hideous smile, he slowly turned to walk away. The conversation had left a bad taste in McArdle's mouth, and he turned and spat to his side, still seated on the corpses. The moment he looked up...

...he saw a giant silhouette. It held something made of metal, which it swiftly thrust at the hideous lackey's torso, skewering him. The figure lifted the man up, swung him around, and slammed him into a wall. The armored torso flew away from the rest of his body.

The young knight McArdle had just watched a man get cut in half right before his eyes.

His underlings used to play with their blades to kill the time, using their short swords to chop fruit in half on tables. He remembered how, when the blades grew dull, they would drag, causing the fruit to go flying once it was cut.

That's right, they would slice up apples. You could do that with apples. But this time, it was a human torso that lay before him. Just as he tried to catch his breath, he heard a low, deep, rough voice overflowing with anger.

"...What are you doing?"

I should be asking you that... McArdle thought. Just what was this person doing here? Then a realization struck him, and his heart thudded in his chest as a chill ran down his spine: he'd seen this man before.

"I asked you a question!" The man roared.

A body too large to be human. A face like a savage beast. And a black rose incised into his left cheek.

It's Gaius Beldarus...what is he doing here?!

Gaius, too, recognized the man in front of him. "You're the man from before..." But before he could finish the thought, McArdle, who'd regained his senses, drew his sword and shouted, "Get over here, boys!"

Three figures immediately emerged from nearby houses, their reactions unnaturally fast. Attacking a vastly outnumbered enemy was their specialty, and it was because of this experience, rather than any sort of teamwork with McArdle, that they quickly fell into formation. Two men flanked Gaius from behind, waving their swords haphazardly, while one blocked his path head-on, his blade pointed squarely at Gaius's head in a pose called the "bull stance." Only the man in front appeared to have had any training with a sword. He no doubt chose the posture because it would allow him to switch easily from offense to defense, mitigating his opponent's size advantage.

Unfortunately for him, his opponent moved with such speed that there was no time to utilize his skills. Gaius lunged forward with a powerful horizontal slash, lopping the man's head off before he could bring his longsword up to defend himself.

Gaius followed the momentum of his strike, using it to spin around in order to leap at the man who had been behind him and to his left. He brought his sword down diagonally, hewing through the second attacker's neck and shoulder. As the final enemy watched his ally's head and arm fall away from his body, Gaius aimed the next swing of that immense, cleaver-like blade at the man's torso. The blade sliced halfway through before it stopped, and the man's now-limp body looked like a vegetable in the midst of being prepared for dinner. Gaius once more lifted up his sword with the body of his opponent stuck to it, swung down hard, and slammed it against the ground, severing the man in two as though he were splitting a log.

McArdle watched, unable to tear his eyes away. *So this is the Black Rose of Igris...?!* He'd thought the stories to be mere tall tales, dismissing his boss's excited reaction as the aggrandized nostalgia older people were apt to fall into. But now he'd realized his mistake—and that he would be the Black Rose of Igris's next victim.

Or so he thought. It appeared luck had not completely abandoned him, for two reasons. The first: now that he had realized the difference in their ability, he'd made escape his top priority. The second: the rest of his underlings had finally arrived.

"Cut him down!" McArdle shouted one last order before he turned and ran off. He did not feel even the smallest shred of duty towards his lackeys; from the very start, he'd only brought them along as disposable tools.

As Gaius turned his gang to mincemeat, McArdle ran until he

could no longer hear the screams, reaching a lone horse tied to a tree just outside the village. He'd untied the others' horses and released them after arriving at the settlement, so that if any problems arose, no one could steal one and come after him—and so that his underlings would be forced to stay behind, buying him time.

He did not spare a single backwards glance; he could not afford to. Willing his violently trembling hands to move, McArdle managed to get into his saddle and set off as fast as he could.

★

"I swear, you're so hopeless, charging in without even thinking..."

Once again, Fog tended to an injured Emon, whose head had nearly been caved in. The young dwarf encountered another bandit on his way to catch up with Gaius, and had been promptly defeated, taking a brutal kick to the head in the process.

Fog had been the one to save him. Wielding a dagger that Gaius had given her, she'd jumped into the fight and taken the bandit down. Despite having no experience with the weapon, which was designed for human hands, Fog had quickly mastered its use—just as she always claimed, she truly was the kobold village's strongest warrior.

"...Are you all right, Emon?" Gaius asked dejectedly; he seemed to blame himself for letting one of the bandits get to Emon.

"I cannae see a thing!" the dwarf replied brightly.

"This idiot will be just fine. What about you, Gaius?" Fog looked up at him.

"You do not need to worry about me. Would you call Darke over? I'd like her to treat one of the women who survived."

With a nod, Fog headed for the wagon at a run. Gaius stared after her for a moment, then knelt down to inspect the body of the bandit she'd killed. He, too, was clad in armor, so Gaius lifted the visor on the man's helmet. When he saw the man's face, he clicked his tongue in frustration and scratched at the back of his head.

"What's wrong, gramps?"

"Come look at this."

"...Hang about, that's...!"

They'd both seen the face before. The pale skin, the dirty hair, and the large burn scar across his cheek: he was the leader of the bandits that had attacked Emon.

After lowering the visor, Gaius slowly rose to his feet and said to himself, "It seems we can no longer go to Ryburgh for supplies."

★

"What! Were! You! Thinking?!" Gaius and Emon shrank as

Sashalia shouted at them.

“I had no choice. Please forgive me.”

“...I’m sorry...”

The first apology came from Emon, the second from Gaius, though the dwarf seemed to be consciously imitating the larger man’s voice and speech pattern. Sashalia smacked Emon so hard tears sprang to his eyes when she heard him seemingly mock her former captain.

Everyone had reconvened just outside the small settlement. While Darke and Fog tended to the female survivor, Emon and Gaius sat on their knees before Sashalia as she berated them.

“That was far, far too reckless! You didn’t know a single thing about the situation! The number of enemies, their formation, who they were—you jumped in without any idea what you were getting into!”

“I apologize...”

“And all without any armor, too! Do you think your shirt is going to stop a sword?!”

“I may have lost my temper a bit...”

“Sir Gaius, don’t you want to get these supplies to the village?! What would you tell them if you’d been hurt?!”

“I’m terribly sorry...”

“And another thing! If my suspicions are correct, you could very well be putting yourself in the middle of House Zigan’s infighting, Sir Gaius!”

“You’re right, I was very foolish...”

On and on the lecture continued. Only after they’d been kneeling so long their legs went numb did Sashalia finally let them go.

★

Gaius slowly, shakily stood on his legs, which still hadn’t fully regained their feeling. “Right, I’ll go bury the corpses...” He returned to the wagon and withdrew a shovel before glumly shuffling off toward the settlement.

Emon’s legs were even worse off; they were still so numb he fell over when he tried to stand. Still afraid of Sashalia’s wrath, he said meekly, “...Does he really need to bother with all that? Why not just leave ‘em be?”

“Excuse you?! What are you saying?! Sir Gaius is *not* that heartless! Are you kidding me?! You’re kidding me, right?! Do you *want* me to kill you?! Do you?! Do you want to die?! You want to die that badly?! Are you stupid?! Are you some kind of idiot?!” Sashalia leaned closer and closer to Emon’s face as her tirade went on, scowling intensely at the dwarf.

“What the hell’re ye gettin’ so mad about?!” Emon practically

shrieked in terror. “Didn’t ye just finish tearin’ into us?! What d’ye even want from the old man, anyway?”

“Ah—” Sashalia froze, her next shout dying out as a strangled noise emerged from her throat. Taking a deep breath, she began her reply.

“...I just don’t want Sir Gaius to be in any danger. But I know he’s always going to do this kind of thing. There’s just no helping it, we all know that about him.”

“Then ye can back off with all the preachin’.”

“No!” Sashalia’s reply was almost as sharp as her glare. “Even though I know that’s how he is, I have to say it! I have to be there to stop him, even if he can’t be stopped! I have to make him do what he won’t! That’s my job! That’s why I’m here!”

“And wha’s *that* mean?”

“I don’t know how to explain it to you. You don’t have to understand. I don’t think I really understand what I’m trying to say either, to be honest.”

“I think yer just a li’l nag, is what ye are...”

“Shut! Up! Right! Now!” She punctuated each word with a chop of her hands, and Emon yelped with each blow.

“The important thing is, when I watched him take off like that, I realized: he really is just like I remember him...” Sashalia said. She’d decided to keep her earlier impatience, from when Darke had held her back, a secret from the others. “I still don’t get it, but he seems like a right handful for ye. Think he’ll ever stop?”

“It’s okay if he doesn’t. I wouldn’t want to follow someone who was only ever wise, or only strong. It’s because of who he is that it’s worth it to have chased him down to be by his side again.”

“Mmm, t’be honest with ye, when I saw him...I kinda thought the same...thought he looked like a right hero...” the young dwarf admitted bashfully.

“So if you want to become a hero king or have a huge harem or whatever, you’ll need to be more like him!” Sashalia grinned smugly as she tapped Emon lightly on the forehead.

...In the end, two women and one young girl had survived the massacre. Leaving them in Northplain didn’t feel right to anyone, given how unsafe it was, nor did they simply want to leave them to fend for themselves. However, as it turned out, they all had relatives in the neighboring territory of Goldchester. And so, it was decided that the group would take a substantial detour to escort the survivors to safety.

★

Back at Fog’s home, Sashalia had just finished folding laundry and

now sat staring at a small piece of cloth in her hands with a troubled look upon her face. The cloth was embroidered with a crest that Gaius had peeled from the armor of one of McArdle's henchmen.

The sigil of House Zigan was a pair of crossed gauntlets. However, the version that Sashalia held was an older crest, from before the family's rule had been confined to Northplain. She'd memorized nearly every crest in Igris's history, so she was able to identify it without having to consult any records of heraldry. A few years prior, the leader of House Zigan had succumbed to illness, triggering a dispute over the succession that even now brewed beneath the surface. The eldest son still lived, but he had withdrawn from the competition very early on, leaving the house divided into two factions: those favoring Keighley, the former leader's eldest daughter, and those who backed the second son, Dugard.

Keighley had taken up the current crest, a lone gauntlet, while it was Dugard who had chosen to resurrect the crossed-gauntlets crest for his faction. Igris's court officials and knights often jokingly referred to the House's infighting as "hand-to-hand combat."

Sir Gaius told me that the knight who manages the Ryburgh Adventurers' Guild, Wyatt, serves Keighley. Then why did his men attack the village wearing Dugard's coat of arms?

She could think of only one reason: they wanted to make it look as though Dugard was attacking one of the settlements his sister presided over. That way, Keighley's camp would have an excuse to openly launch their own attack against Dugard. If they framed it as "a counterattack against Dugard's tyranny and neglect," they could claim the moral high ground.

The reality of the situation did not matter. All they needed was something they could prop up as *the* truth. That was always the nature of such political subterfuge. And to that end, Keighley had sacrificed the tiny village and nearly everyone in it.

I guess to that power-hungry lot, their own people are just kindling for the fire...

Sashalia's brow furrowed. The nobility's chess game left an unpleasant feeling in the pit of her stomach, but she was at a loss as to how to deal with it. The only thing she could do was warn Gaius away from getting involved any further.

★

Out in the woods, Gaius, Fog, and the kobold hunting party were face-to-face with another tree-eating lizard. This time, instead of felling the beast single-handedly, Gaius had merely wounded it by jabbing a spear into its side. The lizard backed up in an attempt to change direction, and the kobolds that encircled it made way to avoid

being crushed underfoot.

"It's heading that way!" Gaius called out.

"I'm on it!" A white figure sprang out from the tall grass, landing on the lizard's back with a dagger in hand—it was Fog, the strongest fighter in the village. She kept her balance as the monster stomped about. Gripping her dagger in both hands, she took aim and plunged the blade deep into the lizard's back.

The rainbow-lustered blade pierced through its scales with ease, bypassing the spinal cord and severing its carotid artery, exactly where she had meant to strike. Fog knew the beast's heart was too deep for her to reach with her weapon, so she'd targeted one of its vital blood vessels instead. She could tell by the feeling against the blade that she'd hit her mark, so in one swift motion she withdrew her dagger and made her exit with a deft backflip, polishing it all off with a clean landing.

The tree-eating lizard attempted to charge away, but with so much blood gushing from its fatal wound, it did not get far. Its front legs collapsed, and the forward momentum sent it crashing into a tree before its limp body hit the earth.

In just one deadly blow, the expert hunter had slain the magical beast. As the others surrounded her, cheering and celebrating, Fog turned to Gaius and winked in a silent show of pride.

The dagger she held in her hands was a little over a foot long, but unlike most, its blade was not straight and single-edged. Instead, it was fashioned as a multipurpose weapon: the blade ended in a pyramid shape, and the middle portion was double-edged. The rainbow-colored brilliance that shone faintly from the metal made it appear to be made of mythril alloy, but in fact it was the effect of a low-level strengthening magic with which the metal was infused.

The dagger, called Stingfeather, was one of several weapons Gaius had brought with him from the capital. He'd given it to Fog, who was fond of wielding longer weapons than the others; the size of the dagger suited her style perfectly. While Gaius was fond of collecting weapons, he preferred to see them in use rather than keeping them shut away in storage; over time, he had given away more and more of his smaller weapons to the kobolds.

"That was splendid!" Gaius, too, celebrated Fog's feat with applause, and she puffed up even more with pride.

"How about that, huh? Pretty amazing, aren't I?"

"Indeed! I was captivated by you."

"Oh, come on, don't go falling for me now."

Laughing, Gaius leaned over and held out his palm for a high-five, which Fog returned. The pair had only been hunting together for a short while, but many magical beasts had already fallen to their

impeccable teamwork.

"This should be plenty," said Fog. "Let's carve it up and head home."

Gaius nodded. "Right. Everyone! Time to get started!" He and Fog waved to signal the others, who came running with smiling faces.

★

"*Gaaah!* I cannae do it anymore! Not another bleedin' second! Me arms!" Throwing his wooden sword off to the side, Emon collapsed in the grass.

"Ha ha ha, we've only just begun," Gaius goaded him. He tapped his "weapon," a piece of kindling, against his shoulder as he gestured to the young dwarf to stand. "If this is your limit, then your dreams of becoming a hero king will only live in your imagination."

"I! Hate! Doin' things! That take! Effort! Or energy! And I hate! Bein' in pain! No more!"

"Indeed. You mustn't push yourself too hard, either. Why don't we take a break after another ten rounds?"

"Och, are ye even listenin' to me? Your trainin's too bloody intense!"

"But mine was even worse..." Gaius's earlier cheer immediately disappeared as he remembered the past, and his face dropped. "My teacher was a queen, the wife of the current king's grandfather."

"Crivvens, she musta been some queen."

"She was a former knight, and a terror on the battlefield. When he saw her in battle, the king fell in love with her immediately and begged her to protect him—that was how he proposed."

"Oooh, now that's a good line...I'll hafta remember that one."

"In any case, that was my teacher. And since I was chosen to protect her daughter, the princess, she made me train until I coughed up blood—urp—" Gaius clapped a hand over his mouth as though just the memory of it was enough to bring him to the verge of it once again.

"She would tie me upside-down over a casket of water, balance a bowl on my feet, and make me fill the bowl up with only a tiny cup. I had to hold stances for hours while balancing dishes on my body. And maintain my balance standing atop a bottle while carrying buckets of water. And kneel like a sofa for the queen to sit upon. And do push-ups over burning incense. And so on. If my form slipped even the slightest bit, she'd step on me, kick me, and whip me."

"Was she a beaut?"

"Hm? ...Ah, that she was. She was very lovely." Gaius had a faraway look in his eyes, now lost in his memories—until his thoughts returned to his training, at which he choked down another wave of

nausea.

“Ye call that trainin’, ye big scunner?! That sounds like *heaven* tae me! This is even more unfair than I thought! Ye got to enjoy all that while I only get tae’ suffer! Aah, I want a gorgeous lassie to abuse me with sweet, sweet torture, too! I want it to hurt so good!”

“I don’t understand you.”

“I’m speakin’ from the heart here!”

Darke and Sashalia watched their exchange, and each made a silent prayer of thanks that Gaius hadn’t put their feet to the coals like that; their drills had been painful enough, but now they realized they had gotten off relatively lucky.

“Sir Gaius really isn’t taking it easy on Emon, is he?” mused Sashalia.

“He can’t afford to. It’s clear that if he were to let Emon go off to the west as he is now, he’d be sending the boy to an early grave. The Knights of the Chain now consists almost entirely of women, so I also suspect he’s having a little bit of fun, training a young man like he would his son. Oh!” she suddenly clapped her hands in delight. “With Emon as his son, myself as his daughter, and you, Lady Denan, as his wife—what an amusing family we’ve become!”

“Stop that,” Sashalia replied wearily.

“But Lady Denan, if you aren’t careful, Madame Fog will take the title of ‘mother’ out from under you.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” Even as she said it, Sashalia had to admit: it was clear just how well Fog and Gaius were getting along in every way, from hunting to daily life. They behaved more like equals, unlike Sashalia, who still had not managed to bridge the gap between herself and her former captain. Gaius and Fog acted as though they’d known each other for years. Sashalia would be lying if she said she never felt jealous at seeing how close they were.

“I know Sir Gaius doesn’t worry about race or half-breeds or any of that, but that would be too—”

“—too perfect for you, right?” Darke cackled.

★

Back at Fog’s house, Darke stood proudly over a fresh, hot meal she’d prepared for everyone.

“I believe you’ll find it to your liking. It’s quite spicy.”

“Wow, I can’t believe you turned a hunk of tough, smelly boar meat into this,” said Fog.

“I tenderized it and chopped it quite thinly, then added some lovely herbs I found growing nearby before trimming the fat and roasting it. Oh, please help yourself to this sauce here. I’m more accustomed to cooking in flat-bottomed pots and pans, so I’m

inexperienced in cooking over an open fire the way kobolds do.”

“Well, look at you. You must be a great chef,” Fog said, impressed.

“Ah, well, I was once responsible for housekeeping at the Beldarus residence. Today’s meal is quite simple, but if you’d like I can provide more of a variety next time.”

“Show me some of your recipes! I want to learn how people outside the forest cook!”

“I’d be delighted to! A few of the other ladies have asked me the same, so perhaps we can all cook together some time.”

Fog and Darke sealed the deal with a handshake as Sashalia looked on, wishing she’d brushed up more on her culinary skills as well. *I can never tell what that woman is thinking, but gosh, she really is clever...*

Despite being a pure-blooded human, Darke had already won over the kobolds, playing up her role as Gaius’s almost-adoptive daughter in order to endear herself to them. In fact, by now, all of Fog’s guests had settled in as proper residents of the village.

As always, the village elder served as the lone voice of opposition, but the wives and mothers of the village had rallied against him again and scared him into silence—a scene that Sashalia had watched with mixed emotions.

It seemed that here in the kobold village, the wives were the ones with all the real power.

★

After dinner, everyone lounged around the sunken fireplace. On all fours, Fluff tottered over to where Emon sat, even as his mother reprimanded him. “You need to practice walking on two legs, Fluff.” The young kobold still couldn’t quite maintain his balance when walking upright.

“Brother Emon, read some more from your funny picture book! The one about Iwanoshin!”

He was referring to a book Emon had brought along, a picture book in a style that was quite popular among the dwarves of the Great Anvil. They told stories through exaggerated artwork segmented into panels. They were almost always penned by dwarves, and enjoyed some popularity even in the western kingdoms.

“Iron Knight Iwanoshin” was an action-packed tale featuring the gallant Iwanoshin, who saved the weak and defeated one strong opponent after another.

“Not tonight, lad, I’m knackered from all that practice. Next time.”

“Aw, that’s lame. Fine, I’ll read it myself!” Fluff wrinkled his snout at Emon, then turned to rummage through the dwarf’s bag.

“Can ye even read—wait, cut that out!”

“Huh? These are weird. What’re these humans doing without their clothes on?”

Fluff had already pulled out a few more illustrated books, which spilled out onto the floor in front of them. Each one bore a more dubious title and indecent cover than the last: “The Princess’s Private Chambers,” “Shall I Remove My Armor?,” “The Priestess Repents, Part II,” and so on.

“Aaagh! Fluff, what’ve ye done?! Don’t look at ’em!”

Sashalia was seated close enough to see what was going on, and her face turned beet-red as she picked up one of the books.

“But why?” asked Fluff.

“If you read these you’ll end up just like Emon, Fluff!” Sashalia had meant it as a warning, but unfortunately, it had the opposite effect.

“Brother Emon’s really cool! I wanna be like him!”

“There’s absolutely *nothing* cool about him! You should never, ever try to be like him!” In her fervor, Sashalia waved the book she’d picked up angrily. It slipped from her hand, traced an arc through the air—and landed squarely in Gaius’s face, where he had been lying down beside the fire.

The force of the book colliding with Gaius’s skull knocked him out cold. Sashalia panicked. Emon hurriedly gathered up his treasure. The young dwarf thought everyone was preoccupied until someone brought their hand down hard on his shoulder.

“Huh?! Oh, big sis, ye scared me.”

“You know, *Emon*...I once had something terrible happen to me, thanks to dwarven treasures just like those. I will be conducting your swordsmanship training tomorrow. Do prepare yourself.”

“Wh-Why? What’d I do?!” Emon protested, now even more panicked than before, until the intensity of Darke’s gaze made him fall silent. Thanks to his real older sisters, Emon had learned the hard way that talking back to a woman with that look in her eyes was dangerous.

“Be afraid. I’ll see *you* in the morning.”

...Dwaemon was headed for disaster.

★

One evening, a group of kobold men and children were gathered at the edge of the lake that supplied the village’s water. They’d been training with the weapons Gaius had given them, but were now taking a break to lounge, chat, take swigs from their waterskins, and enjoy the cool air. Fog, Sashalia, and Darke had spent the afternoon in the forest gathering herbs and wild plants and passed by the gathering on

their way home.

“Gosh, everyone’s more lively than usual today,” said Sashalia.

“The boys are all interested in Emon’s swordsman training,” Fog explained, “and the kids probably just think it’s fun to watch Gaius smack him around.”

“Sir Gaius is a true master of every type of weapon, not only the sword,” Darke said dreamily. “If he trained the young man with a lance, he could assist in hunts.”

As they watched the group from a distance, they saw the break come to an abrupt end as everyone suddenly stood up, alert, and began gathering around something.

“I wonder what’s going on over there.” Sashalia strained her eyes to try and spot the reason for this sudden motion; the men and children appeared to be looking with fascination at something that had fallen on the ground. Some had taken up sticks with which to prod it, as others craned their necks to get a better look at the mysterious object.

Even Gaius had come out from the makeshift training hall, and once he had noticed what was going on, joined the circle. He picked up a fallen branch and stabbed the object to hold it up, which made both the adults and the children yelp and back away.

Fog brought a paw to her forehead to shield her eyes and look. “...It’s dung. A huge clod of magical beast dung. That’s what they’re so worked up over.”

“Fools, aren’t they?” Darke said flatly.

“Oh, but Sir Gaius is so innocent and pure when he acts like a child!” Sashalia was in genuine awe.

“Lady Denan, are your glasses on correctly? Perhaps your prescription needs some adjusting.”

The group of men was now even more raucous than ever. The kobolds raced to grab longer sticks and branches, then proceeded to skewer the dung on their sticks before engaging in mock sword fights.

“Why are men always like this...?” Fog said with a sigh.

“It must be a universal aspect of male nature, human or kobold.” Darke didn’t hide the fact that she thought she was saying something profound.

“Stop acting like you know it all—” Sashalia cut herself off and pointed. “Oh, look, the village elder is joining them.”

“That old wet blanket’s probably going to tell them to keep it down,” grumbled Fog, at which Darke nodded.

The elder, however, took his walking stick in both hands before plunging the end of it into the beast droppings. With even more enthusiasm, and a technique that suggested this was not his first time, he joined the other villagers in their play sword-fighting.

“They’re idiots, all right,” the three women agreed in unison.

Just as they turned to head home, they were greeted by two small boys running over to greet them—Fluff and his best friend, Fishbone.

“Hello there, little ones.” Darke knelt down to pat their heads.

“What brings you out here?”

“Can we borrow that, big sis?” said Fishbone as he pointed to the scoop in Darke’s hand, which she had been using to gather plants.

“Are you going to use it on that dung over there?” Sashalia asked.

“That’s a good idea; we should really bury it sooner rather than later.”

But Fluff shook his head vigorously. “We wanna scoop it up...”

“Scoop it up?” Sashalia tilted her head.

“And carry it...”

“Carry it?”

“And throw it!”

“No, you won’t.” Once again, Fog, Sashalia, and Darke were in complete agreement. The pair huffed and complained before trudging off to join the group of men and other children.

“Where did they even learn a...technique like that?” Sashalia’s voice was full of disgust.

“And just what is so fascinating about animal droppings?” Darke wondered.

“Hey! Don’t look at me!” Fog protested. “I didn’t teach them that!”

In the end, the three came to a silent agreement that they would never quite understand it, and with one last heavy sigh, headed back home. Behind them, the dung-swordfighters had moved on to playing and splashing each other in the lake.

★

In the light of the setting sun, Gaius and the kobolds scooped up cold water from the lake to wash off their bodies and clothes after their intense fight.

This precious source of water was also the source of several rivers, some leading into the heart of the Greatwood. The dried-out river that led to Gaius’s hometown also originated here, but at some point a mound of sand had been piled up between the abandoned settlement and the lake, diverting the river and turning the former riverbed into the roadlike path it was now.

It was dark by the time Fluff, Fishbone, and Gaius returned to Fog’s house. The young pups, who had raced on ahead, were still being towed off by the time Gaius made it home. He sat beside Fog, water still dripping from his clothes. “Ah, I feel refreshed.”

Fog, on the other hand, seemed anything but refreshed, “Why the hell are you soaking wet?” she asked testily.

“I’ll let the summer heat dry me off.”

She shook her head and held out a towel. "Here, I've got more. Dry yourself off already."

"Much obliged." The towel looked more like a handkerchief in his large hand. Fluff stood up and animatedly shook out his newly dried fur as he energetically made "Brrrrr!" noises. It seemed that even after playing all afternoon, he had energy to spare. As soon as Fog finished drying off Fishbone, the two kids took off running.

"Oh, for the love of—come back soon, you two! It's already dark out!" Fog yelled after them.

"Okaaaay!" They replied as they ran, but whether or not they meant it was another story. Dinner was almost ready, and while they hadn't played off all of their energy, surely they must have worked up an appetite. They would return home soon.

"Kids can be a real handful, but at least they're pretty adorable when they're real small. When I see a baby that's just been born, I feel like I'd be willing to do anything for them..."

Fog had a faraway look in her eyes, and her voice had much less life in it than before. Even Gaius, never the most perceptive of people's feelings, could see that she wasn't only thinking of the two children who had just raced off. He remembered that she'd told him the village had once had many small children, many of whom were born shortly before the attack on their village. Gaius nodded silently.

"...Thank you. You've really helped us out. New buildings and houses have gone up one after another, and the tools you brought us are a huge improvement. Our hunts have been better than ever—hardly anyone ever gets hurt anymore, and we have more than enough food to go around now. Have you heard the news? A couple of the ladies are even expecting kids now. It's been a while since the last time that happened."

"That's wonderful news. I can't wait to see them running around the village."

Fog replied with a warm, gentle smile. "I need to get even stronger. To keep those kids safe, and everyone in the village...will you train me, too? In swords, spears, anything."

"It would be my pleasure."

"After all, I'm the toughest soldier this place has got! They'd be hopeless without me around. I'll study your moves, make them a little more kobold-friendly, and then teach the others. I'll be even tougher on them than you are on Emon!"

Gaius nodded his approval.

"So I was thinking? That maybe? It'd be nice? If you stayed here? For good? And helped me train them? O-Only if you want to, though."

"Would it really be all right for me to settle down here?"

"Of course! Everyone thinks so. Even that damned old idiot...even

the village elder agrees. He likes to complain, but deep down he knows you're a good person."

"Really...? I'm very glad to hear it."

"Then it's settled," Fog said, and practically leapt to her feet.

"Indeed. I'm very much looking forward to it."

"Welp, we sure are going to be busy! You and me, whipping this village into shape, getting everyone all toughened up. We've got to make sure things are looking good for all those little ones we'll be welcoming soon." This time, her smile was wide, her fangs on full display. The light from the sunset fell on that smile, illuminating it. Gaius found the sight to be quite moving.

Over the course of his life, Gaius had seen people fight for countless reasons. To secure the interests and prestige of a kingdom, or as a tool for forceful diplomacy. Because they were ordered to. As part of their duty. To fulfill a knightly oath. For the honor and fame of their family name, or simply for money. Or, like the trouble they'd run into in the village, some fought as part of a much grander scheme.

But not the kobold warrior, White Fog. All she fought for was the safety and the future of her people. Her motivation was incredibly pure, noble—and beautiful.

"Fog."

"What's up?"

"You're quite lovely."

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Where did that come from, you big oaf?! Sometimes you say just the dumbest things, you stupid idiotic idiot!" If kobolds could blush, Fog's face would have been bright red.

"You know, my husband used to say that, too: 'You're real pretty when you stop talking!'"

"Ha ha ha. He was a lucky man." Gaius's broad smile looked like the snarl of a bloodthirsty beast, but Fog had come to recognize it for what it was.

Gaius continued, "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Come on, you don't have to be so polite about it. What is it?" Fog cocked her head.

Holding his left hand out to her, Gaius asked, "Would you do me the honor of being my friend?"

Listening to his request, the pure-white, lovely kobold stared at him in stunned confusion before replying.

"...You really are one dense guy, you know that?" She gave him a small, wry smile before placing her paw in his hand. "I've been thinking of you as my friend for ages now."

★

If one were to enter the Ryburgh Adventurers' Guild and walk all

the way into the back, they would find themselves in a small, seedy pub called the Silver Ladle.

The tiny space, thick with the smell of fried food and cheap alcohol, would never be mistaken for a decent place to spend one's time. Nevertheless, it was where the adventurer Theron and his party had decided to convene.

They sat around a circular table littered with bottles of cheap beer and spirits. Despite the quantity of alcohol, the conversation was not very lively, and all of their faces were clouded over.

"We need money bad," muttered Graeme, one of the vanguards. The deeply tanned man was solidly built; even without the heavy armor he wore, he looked like he could hold his own against anyone else in the pub.

"What's Hubert thinkin', makin' us pay him back by the end of the month?! He's crazy!" exclaimed a pinched, high-strung woman. Her name was Divina, and she was the group's lone sorceress. While she'd never attended the Sorcerer's Academy, she had been raised by a family of magicians, and knew how to cast a handful of rudimentary spells.

Even so, armies all over the continent had recently been recruiting anyone capable of casting spells without the need of a costly wand; Divina herself had spent time in the Earl of Grenwyk's private army. Her paranoid, hot-headed nature, however, made it difficult for her to fit in with such an organization, but as an adventurer she no longer had to hold back. She had fallen in with Theron early in the group's history, and the two of them had even gotten married.

Beside her sat the silent lancer, Morgan. The party only knew that he had once worked as a brothel guard—all they needed was his muscle, not his backstory, so no one bothered to ask more, and he never offered to tell.

The only other woman at the table, Abigail, spat out a sharp retort: "There's no goddamn point in whining about it! Fact is, he wants the money, and that's why we're *trying* to come up with a plan!"

Abigail fancied herself a master cat burglar, and while the title was an exaggeration, she did indeed have nimble fingers that were skilled at picking locks and undoing traps. She was wanted for theft in the royal domain of Middlebury, which in her mind meant she had some notoriety, and it was an open secret to everyone in the party but Divina that she and Theron were having an affair behind his wife's back.

"Now now, ladies, we're all good friends here. There's no need to fight. We're going to get through this together." As he flicked aside his long bangs, Theron's smile illuminated his handsome features. Still grumbling to themselves, Divina and Abigail let the argument go.

Cyril the hunter took another bite of deep-fried mystery meat as he watched the rest of the group. He and Theron had known each other since they were young boys, having grown up in the same village. His extensive knowledge of all environments, from dense woods to open plains, made him a valuable asset, well-respected by his leader and old friend...at least, that should have been the case.

“Theron, let’s not forget that it was your gambling that got us in this mess. We had plenty of money after raiding that little dog village, but you went and drank it all away.”

“Who the hell said you could talk, mudpuppy?!” The affable smile on Theron’s face instantly transformed into a nasty scowl as he spun around to face Cyril. Even as an adult, he rarely called his childhood friend by name, instead using an insulting nickname he’d come up with as a boy. Behind Theron, Abigail and Divina joined in, calling Cyril all kinds of names.

“Well, excuse me,” Cyril mumbled into his glass before taking a gulp. Fortunately, it did not seem Theron had heard him. The rest of the group went back and forth, any attempt to plan turning into fruitless bickering, none of which changed the fact that Cyril was right.

The party had borrowed money from a man named Hubert, an influential figure within the Adventurers’ Guild. The situation had only spiraled out of control in the last month, after Theron had lost a huge sum in a few dice rolls, taking out yet another loan and digging them even deeper into the hole.

A violent and vulgar man, Hubert was a senior member of the guild, and many of its members were also in his pocket—either as lackeys or as debtors. However, far from seeing Hubert as a menace, the guildmaster Wyatt considered him an asset; he had a surprisingly convincing way with words, which made him skilled at recruiting new members.

Accepting all this was an unofficial requirement for membership, and anyone who asked for an extension on their loan would be sent off on a dangerous job, never to return.

In other words, living in Ryburgh meant that not paying one’s debts on time was simply not an option if one wanted to stay alive or out of jail. He was a terrifyingly large man, even greater in size than Graeme, with a face that looked as if it had been carved out of stone.

“Let’s just get out of Northplain already,” said Graeme. “We could make a run for it.”

Everyone other than Cyril rejected the plan, shaking their heads. In Goldchester, Northplain’s western neighbor, Theron, Divina, and Morgan were all fleeing charges—for murder, embezzlement, and manslaughter, respectively. To the south lay Midland, where Theron

was wanted for rape and murder, Abigail, for theft, and Graeme for arson. Theron had committed yet more crimes in Grenwyk to the east—murder and burglary—while Graeme had escaped prosecution for several cases of fraud. Fleeing to any other region was not a viable escape plan for the party, especially not for Theron. Northplain was the last domain in which they did not have to hide.

Short of building a high wall around every territory, it was impossible to prevent villainous types such as these from slipping through a territory's borders—a problem faced by the rulers of every domain, no matter the era or region.

Over one hundred years ago, Igris's nobles had put their heads together to devise a method for curbing the issue, and devised a plan that was groundbreaking for its time: they would hire the outlaws that crossed into their lands, assign them the most hazardous jobs, and put them to work in the service of the greater good. Keeping such criminals busy would minimize their havoc, while enrolling them in a registration system would also help to keep tabs on them.

This method did yield positive results, but only within each individual domain: it sent the message that each land, which was largely self-governing, would not hold the criminals of its neighbors accountable. Rather than address that problem, however, domains focused on improving this system's image by fashioning an appealing name for it:

"The Adventurers' Guild" had a much nicer ring to it than "harboring fugitives for cheap labor." Indeed, the situation Theron's party faced was far from rare: working as a registered member of a guild in one territory even as they were wanted for crimes in neighboring lands.

"I guess we've got no choice." Theron crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Hey, mudpuppy, you find out where they are yet?"

"I have. I found out where they've settled down while I was on my third trip into the Greatwood. But the mutts have only just settled back down—they won't have much worth taking yet. We hit the little goblins last year, and they've only just begun to rebuild. They won't last the winter."

Cyril had grown up in one of the frontier settlements on the edges of the Greatwood, and was well accustomed to investigating the forest alone without succumbing to its dangers. Ordinarily, this would have made him a priceless asset to the party, but his terrible relationship with Theron made him something of a pariah, and he was sorely underappreciated by the others.

"Tch. Useless as ever," Theron scoffed, to which Cyril gave no reply. He'd long since realized that trading barbs with the man would only make things worse for himself.

Instead, he stuck to the subject at hand. “We could go milk them for all they’re worth now, but that’d be the end of them. We’d lose out on a valuable source of income. I think we ought to give it another year.”

Cyril laughed at his childhood “friend” inwardly, even as he put up an outward semblance of cooperation. He wasn’t the one in debt here, since he’d never participated in their gambling.

“I don’t care about that! I care about getting money right now!” Theron shouted, slamming a fist against the table. “The monsters that live in the forest—they hunt, right? They’ve got to have magical beast parts we can sell. Maybe even dragon parts.”

The horn from a one-horned boar, like bugbear liver, was a precious ingredient used in making medicine and fetched a very high price outside the forest. Spear peacock feathers were prized ornaments, while the beard of the forest whale could be used in clothing and instruments alike. The woodland dragon’s horns and fangs were the most difficult to procure, which made them the most valuable monster parts of all in the human world outside the Greatwood.

When they’d attacked the “mutts” the year before, Theron’s party discovered a treasure trove of these precious items. It had been more than enough to pay off the debts they’d racked up at the time, and until a few days ago, they had indulged their every desire.

Theron continued, “We won’t recruit extra people to help out, like we did last time—we’ll go in, just the six of us. That way we won’t have to split the loot as many ways. Even if it’s not a lot, it’s gotta be better than nothing.”

Graeme and Morgan nodded in agreement; Divina and Abigail hadn’t had any intention of defying Theron to begin with.

“So we just need to follow that dried-out riverbed, is that right?” Theron asked.

“Right, but I still think this is a bad idea,” Cyril said, arms crossed as he made yet another attempt to push back against Theron. “This is the Greatwood we’re talking about. We’ll need more manpower.”

“Hey, mudpuppy...are you saying you’re not going to cooperate?”

“No...I just think that—”

“All right then, if that’s how it’s going to be, should I go ahead and share with the class? I can tell them why you’re on the run—what you did back in our hometown. I can let your parents know too, while I’m at it, and your cute little sister...one letter is all it would take. Man, I’d love to see the looks on their faces when they find out what their boy did to the village’s pride and joy, dear sweet Lily...”

Cyrus leapt out of his chair in a flash, the blood drained from his face. “Okay, okay! I get it! I’ll do whatever you want! I’d never just

abandon you—I was only worried about you, that’s all!”

“Yeah...*yeah*, that’s what I thought! I knew you wouldn’t, pal!” Theron stood up as well, briskly walking up to Cyrus and clapping a hand down a little too hard on his friend’s shoulder. They both began to laugh, one smiling broadly while the other grimaced.

“We’re best friends, *right?!?*”

“Yeah! Of course!”

The sound of their false laughter continued to drift from the Silver Ladle.

★

One afternoon, Sashalia and Darke were lounging at home, all done with the day’s training. Emon was taking his turn with Gaius, and the two women sat cooling off inside where they could hear the sounds of the young dwarf’s training.

“Ha ha ha, don’t run from me!” Gaius’s voice rang out merrily.

“The hell is that bloody puppet for?!” yelled Emon, his voice hoarse and heavy with exhaustion.

“It’s called a ‘wooden swordsman.’ My teacher, the late queen, left it to me. It reminds me of our lessons.”

“Well, get it away from me, I’m dyin’ here! I need tae catch me breath...”

As she listened to the conversation between the master and his disciple, Darke sighed. “Oh, Emon, you still haven’t managed a single victory. Overpowering Sir Gaius will certainly be tricky.” She sat beside Sashalia and cackled as she pulled off her shirt and wiped away the sweat she’d worked up earlier. The half-elf nodded absentmindedly, more focused on what she saw on Darke’s now-exposed upper body.

Darke’s clothing had been concealing a great number of scars along her back, chest, and arms. Some looked as though someone had taken a red-hot iron to her skin again and again, while others looked to be from a whip. From the thick, tough scar tissue, it was clear that none of the wounds had been allowed to heal properly. Sashalia could see that the injuries extended even down the left side of Darke’s chest.

Back in the Academy, we were all pretty open about changing clothes around one another, but Darke always snuck off to do it...I never really stopped to wonder why.

She’d always just assumed the gloomy young woman had a strange, but relatively harmless past, but after seeing them in person, and having learned about Gaius’s paternal relationship to her, she was intensely curious.

Darke must have felt the unwavering stare; she shifted so that her back was facing away from Sashalia, and brought her arms up to

cover her chest. She began to twist this way and that in mock embarrassment.

“Lady Denan, if you keep staring at me with such desire, I’ll have to change my pants, too! You’ve got me so *excited*, I simply can’t stand it!”

“I wasn’t looking at you like that!”

“Oh? But Lady Mildred and the other girls seemed to enjoy the view.” Darke purred, pretending to sulk.

“Mildred...? One of the girls in our class? The one with the curly blonde hair?”

“Yes, the eldest daughter of Viscount Pilcher.”

Sashalia’s eyes drifted off to a point on the wall behind Darke as she recalled their classmate. She’d been the class representative, a well-mannered and bright young woman. Despite her lineage being one of the most prestigious in Igris, she had never joined in when her classmates would torment the half-elf.

“But why her?”

“We were roommates. I had the girl wrapped around my little finger.”

Sashalia furrowed her brow in confusion as Darke continued.

“Someone of lowly birth such as myself couldn’t have survived that den of well-bred wolves unscathed without a...*friend*.”

“Okay...”

“So I made friends with her. Rather, I waited for an opportunity and took her. My charms are quite strong—she never stood a chance. She and I had so much fun...at least *I* did. Oh, what a marvelous young woman she was! But you know, maybe I should have chosen you instead, Miss Denan!”

“*Don’t come near me!*” Sashalia fell backward and scrambled away from Darke as fast as she could, withdrawing into the corner.

Darke watched her panic with a smile, her eyes crinkling. “Please don’t fret. I’m only mostly telling the truth.”

“And how is that reassuring?!” Sashalia tried to ward her off by throwing the clothing she had been about to change into, but all that did was make Darke laugh.

“In...In all honesty, I didn’t get these scars from Sir Gaius, so there truly is no need to worry on that front,” Darke said, a rare hint of hesitation in her voice. Sashalia’s face grew hot, but not because Darke had correctly guessed what she’d been thinking. No, she was ashamed at herself for suspecting the person she held so dear of hurting someone that way.

I can’t believe myself... Sashalia knew she should respond, but the words wouldn’t come, and an uncomfortable silence stretched between them.

Finally, unable to bear the quiet any longer, Sashalia blurted out, “You know, I’ve been thinking—”

But just then, Gaius called out to them from the other side of the front door. “Hello? May I come in?”

He must have realized that the women were most likely changing out of their training garb. Sashalia was still fully clothed, but Darke had yet to put a shirt on—which did not stop her from calling out merrily, before Sashalia could warn Gaius:

“Yes, of course!”

The door swung open as Gaius said, “Fog was wondering if you’d like to gather mushrooms with...her...”

“Oh, I would *love* to.” Darke turned to face him, her bare breasts on full display. Gaius gave her a look of disgust.

“...You’ve put on weight again.”

“*Huh?! The hell did you just say to me?!*”

Darke sent him tumbling backward with a single, swift punch to the face, and kicked him over and over until she’d rolled him back out of the house.

“What an absolute piece of filth. That old bag *never* reacts to me showing off my body.”

“R-Really...”

Darke stomped back into the room and quickly put on her clothes, then huffed and stomped out of the house. Sashalia was left dumbfounded. She scrambled to follow suit and help Fog out, but when she had stripped down to her underclothes, she spotted Darke’s handkerchief on the floor.

“That’s right...” Sashalia thought aloud. “When I first met him, Gaius was bringing gym clothes to the Academy. Were those for Darke...? I wouldn’t have guessed her to be the forgetful type.”

There was a knock at the door. Thinking it was Darke coming back for her handkerchief, Sashalia called out, “Okay okay, I’ve got it right here. Just come in already.”

The door creaked as it swung open, and once again Gaius walked in. “Fog says to bring a bucket to—*gaaah!*”

“Sir Gaius?! *Eyaaaah—!*”

Sashalia desperately tried to cover herself as Gaius stumbled backward, bumping into everything between himself and the door as he tried to stammer an apology. “I-I-I’m terribly—so very—my apologies for—!”

Even after making it outside, it sounded as though he still hadn’t regained his composure; in the distance, Sashalia could hear kobolds crying out in surprise.

For a moment, she simply stood in the middle of Fog’s house, trying to sift through her emotions. Once she’d calmed down, a single

thought remained:

“...I think I’ve finally beaten her at something!” She pumped her fist in celebration.

★

Just outside the village, Gaius and a group of the kobolds stood in front of a freshly cultivated field as the village elder recited an ancient poem. They sat around his feet, taking a break from the exhausting work, only half listening as the elder moved on to a wordless chant.

“Ommnyo monyooo...munyaaa munyaaa...”

Gaius adjusted his wide-brimmed straw hat as he watched, wondering if this was truly part of some ceremony, or if the elder was simply making it up as he went along. The chanting grew even more bizarre, and he decided that this was simply one of those times it was best not to question things.

To his surprise, a faint green haze began to materialize around the elder, but the other kobolds did not react; some yawned while others struck up idle conversation with their neighbors.

“What’s that, then? You don’t think these crops from the outside will grow well? We’ll manage somehow. You can just do what you always do.”

The village elder had stopped his chanting and was now speaking directly to the mist—the spirits of the dead, a kobold explained.

“You want us to throw you a festival? Come now, we can’t spare that kind of time... Oh, I know, we can have one after the harvest. How does that sound? ...Right, yes... It’s a deal, then. Much obliged.”

With the spectral negotiations apparently concluded in their favor, the elder hurried through the ceremony with a few more half-hearted chants, then turned to the others.

“Oi, listen up now. They’ve agreed to lend us a hand this growing season.”

“Thanks a bunch, old-timer. Back to work, everyone!”

Fishbone’s father, Red Eye, was the first to hoist himself back onto his feet. He was in charge of the village’s agricultural endeavors, and on the orders of their leader, the others followed suit.

Gaius stepped forward to express his gratitude to the village elder, but the old kobold turned away in a huff and hobbled off.

“Don’t worry about that old bag of bones, Gaius. You know how he is. Now come on, today’s planting day!”

Red Eye gave him a reassuring pat on the backside. At first Gaius gave no reply, but after collecting himself he nodded enthusiastically, and together they made their way to the field.

With the tools Gaius had purchased, the kobolds had worked hard to transform the stretch of rock-hard, grassy land into soft, fertile

earth ready for farming. They asked Gaius to help out when they needed the extra muscle, while the tireless, gentle golem Claudette had helped to plow the soil and form the crop rows. Kobolds that would typically be out hunting also lent a hand, and with all their efforts combined, the work had progressed quickly.

Each person was assigned a different variety of seed to plant, with Gaius on carrot duty. This particular strain, the Midland carrot, would be ready to harvest by late fall, but since it could survive in the soil even as winter fell, it was an ideal crop for the village.

In addition to the new tools, Sashalia had also read to the kobolds from a farmer's almanac, and they'd absorbed the information incredibly quickly. She'd wondered if perhaps the kobold's shorter lifespans made them very adept at acquiring new knowledge.

"Hey hey hey, watch where you're stepping! You'll mess up the rows!"

"A-Ah, I apologize..."

"You've gotta plant these further apart!"

"L-Like this?"

"Okay, now cover them with some soil...gah, that's too much! You're pushin' them down too far!"

"Oh no..."

"...You're just all brawn and no brains, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid that's true." Gaius laughed and brought a hand up to scratch the back of his head, then realized too late he was rubbing dirt in his hair and tried in vain to brush it out.

"'Stand by the Sword'...that slogan hasn't done me any good."

"Ya got that right. Your master shoulda trained you in how to swing a hoe, not just a weapon."

Gaius imagined the queen with a hoe in her hands and chuckled. She was a brawny woman, so in a way it did suit her, despite her status.

"Don't worry 'bout it, you've got me to teach you."

"I wonder if I'll ever get it right...?" Gaius sighed, looking at his massive, dirt-caked hands. This was more than his usual humble deflecting; he seemed to truly believe he would never make a good farmer.

"Well, you're not going anywhere, so we've got time to work on ya, don't we? And knowing how thick that skull is, we'll need all the time we can get."

For a second, Gaius's expression betrayed just how much those words amazed him. With a small, gentle smile, he looked down and mumbled, "That's right..." He pressed down on the dirt beneath his hands, as though trying to contain his feelings within the earth.

"Didn't I just tell you not to press down so hard, ya damned

fool?!” Red Eye exclaimed, dunking his scoop into a nearby bucket of water and flinging it in Gaius’s face.

★

“Fluuu-uuuff, Bloss-soooooommm, come play with meee!”

Fishbone stood outside Fog’s house, his small but mighty voice calling for his friends like he always did, with his usual vacant expression and ever-present runny nose.

“Comiii!”

Fluff’s reply grew louder as he raced to the door and flung it open. The boys immediately started poking and shoving one another playfully.

“Let’s play ‘spear of bravery’! I found a perfect spot for it by the riverbed!” Fishbone announced with glee.

“I’m gonna beat you again this time!” Fluff boasted. Blossom emerged from the house behind her cousin, her arms crossed.

Fluff turned around and shouted, “Brother Emon, you come too!”

“No way, laddie,” he groaned, lying beside the sunken fireplace. “I’m beat from this mornin’s drills.”

Fluff craned his little neck and looked around. “Where’s Uncle Gaius, then?”

“Tendin’ the fields with Fishbone’s dad.”

“Aw maaan,” the tiny white kobold sulked, “that’s lame. Okay mom, I’m gonna go play!”

“See you later, Auntie!” Blossom said with a wave, and the three children took off.

Fog sat across the fireplace from Emon, weaving threads of bark into rope. She called after them without looking up. “Don’t even think about going into the woods, now! The wind’s supposed to get real bad later today, so come back soon! Blossom, keep those two knuckleheads out of trouble!”

“I will, Auntie!”

“Okaaay,” the two boys replied together, as unconvincingly as ever.

Fog looked up from her work to ask, “So Emon, what’s that game the kids were talking about? ‘Spear of bravery’? It’s not something dangerous, is it?”

“Ah, don’t worry, there’s no real danger,” Emon said as he rolled over onto his side. “Jus’ somethin’ silly the wee ones’re crazy about lately. Ye each grab a long stick, all about the same length, then ye take turns stabbin’ the target with ’em.”

“And what ‘target’ would that be?”

“A big steamin’ beast pie.”

“Again with the dung...” Fog’s disappointment was obvious, but

Emon continued.

“And the one that gets their stick ‘spear’ all the way in is the winner. It’s like a test of bravery, to see who’s willin’ tae get their hands the closest to it, an’ that’s where the name comes from.”

“That sounds like stupidity to me, not bravery.”

“It weren’t my idea, just so ye know,” he added hastily to avoid her scorn.

“Sheesh, these kids...wait...! Did you just say they *touch* the stuff?!” Fog exclaimed.

“Well, only if they push too far. And if someone messes up, they chase the others down and wipe it on ‘em.”

“Go stop them! I just washed their clothes—I am *not* doing laundry twice in one day!”

“Aw crivvens, don’t make me get up...”

“I’ll be right behind you, just go and get their clothes for me.”

“All righ’, all righ’, I’ll go. At least they’re only down at the dry river.”

Emon grimaced as he hoisted himself to his feet, stretching his aching limbs before hobbling out the door.

★

“Fluff wins this time,” Blossom announced with little enthusiasm. Fishbone sank to his knees, while Fluff cheered and raised both his little arms in triumph.

“Do you wanna go next, Big Sis?” Fluff turned to her excitedly, but she wrinkled her nose.

“No way. And if you come near me with those gross hands, I’m gonna punch you.”

Fluff looked down at his dirtied hands, wiped them off on his apron for a second, then nodded. “All clean!” he chirped, despite overwhelming evidence of the contrary.

“Oh no, Auntie’s gonna get so mad at me...” Blossom, who was usually prepared for their antics, picked up the waterskin she’d brought along and used it to wash her cousin’s hands.

“Let’s go again!”

“I just cleaned you up! And it’s starting to get really windy, so we gotta go back now. Come on, Fishbone, I’ll wash your hands too before we go.”

She turned towards Fishbone and noticed he was facing away from them, looking inquisitively down the dry riverbed. He’d seen Gaius come out of the forest down this path many times now, but this time, someone new was walking along it.

No, not just someone—a group. A group of humans.

“Ooh, more humans! I wonder if they know Uncle Gaius?! Or Miss

Darke? Or Sister Sasha?" Fluff was bursting with excitement as he raced out from behind Blossom to greet them.

"No, don't!" But she was too late to stop him. In no time, Fluff had reached the group and was running circles around their feet.

"Hey! Hey! Where'd you come from? Whose friend are you?" He finally sat still in the hopes that they might pet him like Gaius always did when he came home. Looking up with adorably large, round eyes, he sniffed the air lightly as he waited...

...and noticed something strange.

He couldn't smell the same warmth that he felt from his mother and the other kobolds, or the strong passion that Gaius and Emon radiated. There was something else there, a scent on their souls that the young boy had never come into contact with before: malice.

★

A small, fluffy white shape traced an arc through the air before landing hard in the grass.

As he brought his foot back down, Theron turned his head and boasted to the rest of his party, "Did you see how far that thing flew?!"

Abigail, also in high spirits, giggled. "Try this one next! Look, his fur looks like it's got a fish skeleton on it!" She lifted up the small kobold by the scruff of the neck as he wriggled desperately with all his might. The third, amber-colored one stayed where she was, frozen in place out of fear.

"Fluff! Fluff!" The kobold that was being held up wriggled around and bit down as hard as he could on his captor's hand. Abigail hissed and dropped him. His tiny teeth did not inflict much damage, but they hurt enough to send her into a rage.

"You goddamned *fleabag*! How dare you?!" She grabbed the little beast by the neck once more and slammed it into the ground. Abigail then grabbed hold of one of its tiny, flailing front legs and twisted it hard until she heard a dull *pop*. The little kobold wailed in agony as she grabbed his other front paw and bent it backward violently until she felt the same sensation of something giving way along with that terrible sound. The shock of the pain made him go limp.

Abigail's anger had not yet abated; she changed her grip to press down on the creature's throat with both hands, applying more and more pressure until—

"Get the hell away from 'em!"

Theron's party turned in the direction of the sudden, enraged shout to find a young man barreling toward them.

"What's with the pipsqueak?" Graeme said, rubbing his chin. Each movement emitted the harsh sound of metal against metal as his

armored forearm scraped against his heavy chestplate. His gear was far too heavy-duty for an expedition, but in the Greatwood one needed every protection they could muster, especially the vanguard.

Every so often, Divina would re-cast a support spell to lighten the weight of Graeme's armor, a tactic common in the armies of the southern kingdoms.

"Is that a human...? No, the proportions are all wrong," said Graeme.

"And he's hideous," Divina added.

None of them had ever met a dwarf before, and they'd only expected to find the kobolds. For a moment, all of the humans were at a loss, and so they missed the opportunity to take him out before anything else could happen.

The young man reached the two kobolds lying in the grass and fell to his knees beside them.

"Bro... Em...on..."

"Fluff! Hang in there!" Emon howled. "Och, this is too much...!"

He picked up the tiny white kobold and began to lift him up, but froze when he saw the blood dribbling from his mouth. No doubt he was suffering from massive internal injuries after Theron's beating.

Emon panicked, unsure of how to handle someone so gravely injured; his own injuries, no matter how severe, had always healed in no time. He wailed in sorrow once more and lay the tiny kobold back on the ground. He then turned to Abigail, who still had Fishbone pinned to the ground, and started to run towards her.

Her hand flew to the short sword at her side, waiting to counterattack—but before she could draw her steel, Theron appeared in front of her and brought the dwarf up short with another kick to the stomach. He knelt down as Emon gasped for air, and brought down his armored fist: once, twice, three times. Each time Theron punched him, Emon's body jerked violently.

Theron stopped after the tenth blow. He reached into the nearby grass and picked up a heavy rock.

"Come on, cut it out. He's not one of those dogs—kill him and you'll be a wanted man in Northplain, too." Graeme's voice held neither pity nor remorse; he was simply stating facts.

"Who'd see me? We're too far into the Greatwood to have any witnesses," Theron said. "And if somebody did see us, all we'd have to do is kill them, too." With that, he turned back to his victim and began bashing in the dwarf's head with the rock again and again.

Thud. Crunch. Squish.

"Hey, you alive in there?" Theron looked down at the young man and stood up when he saw that the boy's chest was no longer moving with breath. He looked down at the blood spattered up the length of

his arm and clicked his tongue in disdain.

★

Back in the newly cultivated field, several kobolds looked up from their work with puzzled expressions as a strange, faint chirping noise drifted in on the wind.

“Hey, did someone put out another spirit call?” Red Eye asked, but when he turned to either side he was met with shaking heads and confused looks. “Then was it you, old man?”

The village elder, who was taking a water break, only lowered his waterskin just enough to reply, “Probably just some little whelp playing around. Some of the little ones send them out without even realizing it.”

Red Eye shrugged. “Ah, well. We’ll have to see who’s been teaching their kid that kinda thing when we get back.”

Clearly convinced, he turned and resumed working. “What’s a ‘spirit call’?” Gaius asked.

“Huh? Oh, it’s how shamans talk to the dead. No one really knows if it’s something you can learn, or if you’re just born with it.”

“That’s incredible! So you can use it to communicate over great distances, too?”

“Nah. To the rest of us, it’s just noise. All it’s really good for is seein’ who’s got what it takes to be a shaman, ’cause only they can understand it or use it.”

The village elder cleared his throat and began, “You know, a long, long time ago, our ancestors...”

Gaius, who’d been visibly let down by Red Eye’s dismissive explanation of this mystic power, now lit up and began to nod along emphatically.

“Oi, you know you don’t have to humor the old geezer, right?” Red Eye elbowed Gaius in the calf. “Wind’s picking up, too, so we should head out now.”

“O-Oh, right...” Trying to contain his disappointment, Gaius bent down to resume working when he noticed Red Eye now had a peculiar look on his face.

“But you know...even kids don’t like doin’ spirit calls. Makes the user all glum, I hear.”

★

Fog was the fastest in the village. No one had ever bested her in a race. And yet...

Why can’t I run any faster, damn it?! Tears blurred her vision as she sprinted with all her might. I can’t believe I was so naïve...

They'd survived the attack on their old village, rebuilt sturdy homes, and now had plenty of food. They had so much now. Every day, they worked hard from sunrise to sunset, totally absorbed in the day's tasks.

With each hurdle they overcame, Fog had begun to believe more and more that they were truly, finally safe. Now she regretted that belief with each step that carried her forward.

All this time, I'm the one that really went soft!

But it was all right. She would make it in time. She would. With the precious little time Emon bought her, her legs would get her there in time. Yes, everything would be all right.

As part of her training, Gaius had advised her to get used to the feeling of carrying a sword at all times. Fortunately, today was no exception. She was lucky. Extremely lucky. So she would most likely get there in time.

*No, I **will**! I have to!*

Fog raced on, faster than the wind that pushed against her. She dashed past Amber Blossom, who was still rooted to the spot in terror, and quickly stood between the child and the humans.

She quickly took in the situation: Fluff lay still, Fishbone was terribly injured, and Emon was so badly wounded that she couldn't tell if he was even still alive.

Five humans. One had long hair, one held a lance, and one was clad in heavy armor, while the two women wore lighter gear.

Five against one would be no problem. No problem at all. Fog unsheathed her dagger, Stingfeather, and pointed it at the adventurers.

"My name is White Fog, and I am the strongest warrior in the village! I'm not letting you take another step!"

She held her dagger out before her, similar to the "bull stance," but with the point of her weapon lowered slightly—this was the "key stance" that Gaius had taught her. This defensive posture would allow her to react more easily to her opponent's movements; as things were, she couldn't afford to be the first to charge in. Fog then took a deep breath, lifted her face up to the sky—

Awooo—!

—and howled as loudly as she could.

Unfortunately, the wind was now blowing fiercely, and they were a fair distance away from the village. There was no guarantee the sound would carry to the others.

But Fog had no time to worry about that. All she could do was act. If one tactic failed, she would move on to another.

"Blossom! I'll hold them here! Run back and get help!"

The young girl didn't do as she was told. Or rather, she couldn't.

The terror of witnessing such a horrific scene still held her rooted to the spot, and her thoughts were in disarray. After all, she was still a child, only a few years older than Fluff and Fishbone, and Fog knew it was not her fault. Her gaze remained fixed on her enemies. They, too, stood staring back at her—staring at her weapon, to be precise.

“No way...that’s mythrill ore.”

“She’s got an enchanted weapon?”

“What’s a mutt doing with something like that?”

“That alone would be more than enough to pay off our debts!”

“...If it’s the real deal.”

The adventurers were surprised, but not overly excited; their reaction was more akin to a farmer pleasantly surprised by his harvest.

Just as her son had done, Fog sniffed the air to catch the scent that their emotions were giving off.

Their guards are down... They think I’m easy pickings.

But another scent caught her attention even more than that.

I’ve smelled this before...! Back then...when we were attacked! It was them!

Her husband, her brother, his wife, her friends and all her neighbors—and her own newborn child, who hadn’t lived long enough to be given a proper name. The ones who had taken them all away were now standing right in front of her, and her hatred flared back to life in all its fury.

Her blood boiled. She wanted nothing more than to pounce on them, tear their throats out, hack them all to pieces—

—but she also knew better than to let her anger blind her. She purposely relaxed her stance, lowering her dagger even more until it was pointed at the ground. This was the “fool’s stance,” designed to lure an opponent into making the first move. *I’ll let one of them come at me first, then aim for their chest.*

Her opponents were the people she loathed the most. The tiniest slip-up would mean death. Despite all this, Fog remained calm and collected, patiently awaiting her chance.

“Don’t let that one get away!” Theron ordered. “That dagger alone’s worth everything in their hovels combined!”

“Got it.” The heavily armored man tossed his shield aside and drew his one-handed battleaxe. Morgan, the lancer, also readied his long, slender spear, in the style called a *framea*, and together they closed in on Fog from both sides.

These two are nothing compared to Gaius, she thought to herself. The lancer reached Fog before the axe-man, but she’d been anticipating that his attack would be first and she easily dodged his thrust with a jump.

Fog landed on the spear's handle and raced up its length, to Morgan's surprise. He'd never dealt with anything remotely like this before. By the time he'd realized he should let go of the spear and fall back, it was too late.

"Sting!" Fog cried. Stingfeather's hilt was adorned with three mythril orbs, one of which flared to life with a brilliant rainbow-colored light. In a flash, the dagger's blade grew long and thin. This was the magic it had been imbued with, entrusted to her by Gaius.

By resonating with the mythril, which readily conducted magical energy, the tiny amount of enchanted material in each orb was amplified, in this case allowing the user to temporarily extend the blade's reach. Most likely, this finely crafted weapon had been designed for assassination, and must have taken an exceptionally skilled craftsman to make; the cost of such a weapon's creation, too, was no doubt astronomical. Gaius would not have been able to use such a delicate weapon without breaking it, and Darke had declined to use it for fear she would do the same.

The foot-long dagger had nearly tripled in length, and combined with Fog's forward momentum, soon found its mark—

"Ah—"

—Morgan's expression briefly changed to shock as the blade sank through the man's right eye and bored straight through his skull. He gurgled like a dying pig as his one good eye rolled back in his head. Within the same second, Stingfeather returned to its original length.

Morgan managed to choke out the name of an unknown woman before he sank to his knees and keeled over, falling on his face. Fog landed right beside him and quickly recovered her stance, shooting quick glances around herself. The others hadn't yet comprehended what just happened, which meant she still had the element of surprise.

I can do this!

Tightening her grip on the handle, she quickly evaluated her options. Stingfeather had three charges in all, one of which she'd used in training, another just now. She was down to one more shot against four opponents, so at most, she could only take down one more with the dagger's magic. Of the group, the two women were the least heavily equipped; that most likely meant they weren't her biggest threats.

It's okay. I can do this. I am doing this.

Fog kicked off against the earth and launched herself forward—so that she could return home and tell everyone that she *had* done it.

★

She got Morg—

Before Theron even had time to process the thought in words, Fog

was flying toward him. He dodged her strike and leapt back, making sure to put extra distance between them to avoid the dagger's extended reach. He'd seen his fair share of combat, but not like this—the damned mutt just kept coming after him.

"Graeme!" he yelled in between dodges, "Your shield, damn it! Grab your shield!" Theron knew trying to deflect that magical strike with his greatsword was far too risky.

Graeme, clearly not one for high-pressure situations, finally picked up his heater shield in the time it took for Fog to lunge at Theron three more times.

"I got it!" he cried out. He took a quick breath to steel himself before throwing himself in the path of Fog's next attack, blocking it with the misshapen yet sturdy shield. Even if she used the dagger's ability, the weapon couldn't pierce it.

Theron leapt out from behind Graeme and positioned himself behind the kobold, flanking her between the two of them, before taking his sword up with both hands and unleashing a powerful diagonal slash. It was the most simple yet powerful attack in the greatsword wielder's repertoire: the "fury slash."

But instead of slicing his target in half as he'd intended, the sword swung through thin air and sank deep into the ground. Fog had rushed into the attack, dodging the blade by running towards and under the strike rather than away from it.

"*What the—?!* " Theron nearly toppled forward, thrown off-balance by his attack, and was soon met by the sight of that magic-imbued blade aiming straight for his face in a horizontal slash. He released his grip on his sword and tumbled to the left, just barely avoiding the blade as it *whooshed* past.

Impossible... Theron hadn't yet regained his footing. His sword was still embedded in the ground. Graeme wouldn't make it in time to help him. The kobold, on the other hand, had already recovered and was already back on the attack.

He wouldn't be able to dodge the next strike. He didn't even have the time to raise his hands up in a feeble attempt at self-defense.

Impossible... Impossible... Impossible...!

The same word raced through Theron's mind again and again as his whole body braced itself for death...

...but the blow never landed. Both he and Fog were so focused on the next blow that neither of them noticed the strange sound coming from Divina.

Rou...aaa...eee...

It sounded like an incantation being chanted, and as soon as she finished—

Shoom!

—the air between her palms crackled with energy, firing a bolt of light aimed squarely at Fog's torso. It found its mark just as Fog's dagger was inches away from Theron's throat, and completely pierced through one of the kobold's sides and out the other, searing the kobold's pelt and vital organs. The force of the sideways blow sent Fog spinning like a top before she crashed down into the grass, gasping desperately for air as she collapsed into a twitching heap.

"Theron!" Divina rushed to his side. It took him a while to fully realize he'd narrowly avoided death, but when he did, he turned to his wife and said, "Ah... You really saved me there, Divina...thanks."

Standing up on shaking legs, he gave a heavy sigh of relief. "That's our one and only sorceress for you, always saving the day."

"She's not the *only* one who can use magic..." Abigail huffed, though even she couldn't deny that Divina had saved his life.

"I'm so glad I made it in time," she purred, stroking his chest.

The spell she'd cast was called a "magic bolt," a widely used magical attack. Depending on the school of magic being cast, the spell went by several other names: "magic arrow," "magic missile," and so on.

Sorcery was different from incantation, or from black magic, which involved channeling power from the souls of the departed, divine spirits, or other mystical entities. Sorcerers manipulated certain magical elements to generate their mystical effects.

Spells like the magic bolt were cast by gathering and attuning the magical elements within one's own body before converting them into a blast. With each refinement of those elements, a strange sound would emanate from within the caster's body. Though it wasn't coming from the caster's voice, to an outsider it sounded like an incantation so it came to be known as "chanting." What's more, among most of the non-magic-using populace, practitioners of all three arts were frequently called "sorcerers" despite the school of magic they used.

"...Morgan's done for," called out Graeme, who was kneeling beside the body to inspect it.

"Yeah? That's awful and all, but what's done is done. We'll bury him once we finish our business here."

"'Business'? So we're still doing this?" Graeme was always quick to lose his nerve.

"That's right. That magic dagger could be worth loads of gold, but we won't know unless we take it back with us. That's why we're here, isn't it—to find something to pay off our debts? And as payback for what they did to Morgan, we'll burn the place down and kill every last one of them. But first...Abigail!"

"Yeees?" She'd picked Fog up by the leg and was watching her

convulse.

“Hold her just like that.”

Theron picked the dagger up, turning it over in his hands to inspect it. As he’d said, it was impossible for him to tell if it was truly made of mythrill ore. He soon gave up his inspection of the knife, clicking his tongue in irritation.

“How’d you make it do that?” he said as he approached the kobold. He lifted the blade and pressed it against her stomach. It pierced through the skin with little resistance. Fog trembled and coughed up blood as the dagger twisted deeper into her flesh.

“Hey, you little mongrel, I’m talking to you.” Theron jabbed a finger into the wound. Fog writhed in pain, but gave no reply—nor did Theron expect her to. The torment was nothing more than an act of revenge.

“I don’t really care if you can’t talk, or just don’t want to. You’re dead either way.” With that, Theron lowered the enchanted dagger and held it up to the kobold’s throat.

Just then, he saw something behind her—the figure of a very large man in a straw hat, approaching them very quickly. He held what appeared to be a hoe in his massive fist.

“What the hell...?” Theron muttered as he squinted, as though to make sure his eyes weren’t deceiving him. “Is that a farmer?”

“Hey, don’t tell me there’s actually a settlement around here?” Graeme’s nerves were even more frayed than before. “This is bad. What’ll we do if he saw us?” First the young dwarf, then this mysterious man—it made sense to believe that humans were living somewhere nearby. He didn’t object to adding another body to the pile, but he wanted to avoid being caught.

Theron, however, was unbothered. “I grew up on the frontier, and let me tell you, no sane person lives in the Greatwood on their own. It’s way too dangerous. And even if there were, it’d be a lone wolf or two at most.”

Graeme relaxed a bit, taking heart in that line of reasoning. “So if we kill them too, there won’t be any trouble for us.”

“Exactly. So let’s get to it.”

This time, their guard was immediately up. Though the newcomer appeared unarmed, he was still well-muscled, and after the trouble that kobold had given them they wanted to take the initiative while he was still too far to do any damage.

“Divina, how are you doing?” said Theron. “Charge up another magic bolt and blast him once he’s a little closer.”

That mysterious chant-like sound again welled up from within Divina as she began manipulating the energy within herself. Eventually, faint light started to appear along her face and hands,

evidence that the magic was flowing through her blood vessels. Once she'd finished her preparations, she stood with her hands held out, aimed at the approaching figure; the technique was known as "pre-casting."

Once the farmer was close enough for her to discern his face, Divina let loose the magic she'd stored up, firing the burst from her outstretched hands. The blast made a sound like a thunderclap as it erupted, careened toward the man's head—

—and with a sharp, metallic *clang!*, the energy suddenly careened off to the side. The bolt hit the ground and evaporated, leaving a small crater in the earth. The adventurers all looked from the site of the impact to the man in complete shock.

There were powerful defensive spells that acted as shields, or else augmented armor to withstand the force of magical blasts. But to *physically deflect* a spell—and with a hoe, no less—was something they'd never thought possible.

Theron was the first to come back to his senses. "D-Divina! Fire another one! Get ready, Graeme!" They'd missed their chance by standing around dumbfounded, and would now have to fight him up close. Theron still strongly believed they had the advantage, by far. Or so they should.

So why, he wondered, is there such a strong chill running down my spine?

Theron braced himself. If he and Graeme could get on either side of the man, they could overwhelm him...but he never gave them that chance.

Instead, he made a beeline for Graeme, who flailed his battle axe around in panic. The man easily slipped under Graeme's arm in the middle of a wayward swing and swiped his hoe up once to take the armored man under the chin. He turned to face Theron as Graeme fell to his knees, tipped over onto his side, and rolled onto his back.

There were no wounds or even any damage to his armored body. But what had once been his face was now nothing but a stomach-turning slick of muscle, bone, and the too-large spheres of his exposed eyeballs. One swipe of that gardening tool had torn Graeme's face clean off.

Still, Theron pressed forward with his attack. Even if he couldn't catch the opponent in a pincer attack, he recognized the familiar sound of Divina having completed preparations for another magic bolt.

This was their last chance.

And he missed it.

In no time the farmer had closed the gap between them, making it impossible for Theron to bring the length of his greatsword to bear.

Throwing his hoe aside, the farmer grabbed Theron by the throat, lifted him up, and spun him around—using him as a shield to absorb Divina’s magical blast.

The magic tore through his leather armor like wet paper, ricocheting within his ribcage and completely incinerating his lungs down to the bronchioles before going out. Theron opened his mouth in a wordless scream, blood and smoke gushing from his mouth as he tumbled backward before skidding to a stop.

Theron’s head spun as the burning agony assaulted him; every ragged attempt at a gasp brought him no relief, and in fact, no air at all. From the ground, he heard yet another chant begin—and then abruptly end. Struggling to lift his head, he saw the farmer wrap a massive hand around Divina’s throat, lifting her up just as he had her husband. This time, however, he merely flicked his wrist. The simple movement was enough to snap her neck in his fist.

Abigail dropped her short sword in terror and turned to flee. She did not make it far—the farmer picked up Graeme’s battleaxe and threw it at her, the heavy blade embedding itself in her back and sending her tumbling into the grass.

Why... How...?! How could this...happen to me...?! Theron screamed from within the murky depths of his dimming consciousness. All that emerged from his mouth was a bloody froth.

...Mudpuppy...Cyril! He’s still out there! Come help me!

Cyril was still somewhere in the trees; he’d hung back to guard the group’s rear.

Get over here! Hurry! I...I’m going to die...!

Theron knew his wounds were fatal. Even if Cyril were to show up, he would fare no better against the farmer. And more than that, Cyril would never pass up this chance for freedom.

However, in the midst of his death throes, Theron could not grasp that, even if Cyril were there, he would instead be celebrating the death of his childhood “friend.” All he could think was...

...That damned idiot... You always were...

“Useless” was how he’d meant to finish that thought, but it was too late. Theron would never think again.

Chapter 6: That Which Was Entrusted

“Fog!”

Gaius raced to the fallen warrior’s side. There was no reply. He quickly scanned her body and saw the terrible wounds she’d suffered, a large gash across her stomach.

He’d seen this before. So very many times before. And he knew just how unlikely it was that she’d recover.

Gaius turned to the others. Bloody saliva trickled from Fluff’s slightly open mouth as he lay unconscious. There were no visible wounds on the young boy’s body, but he guessed one of the adventurers must have punched or kicked him. Whatever the cause, it was apparent that his condition was critical.

Fishbone moaned feebly in between ragged, pained breaths, just barely conscious; he, too, was in grave danger. Blossom, though badly shaken, was fortunately uninjured. Emon’s head was so grotesquely caved in that Gaius jumped in surprise when he heard the dwarf’s voice.

“I’m...sorry...” With tremendous effort, Emon managed to lift his head ever so slightly and choke out the words. A human would have long since succumbed to his wounds.

“I’m going to carry you back to the village.”

“So...rry...I’m...so...”

“Don’t try to speak!”

“I’m...so sorry...Fl...uff...”

Gaius bit down hard on his lip. He scooped Emon up, set him on his back, and used his handkerchief to tie the young man’s hands around his neck. Under better circumstances, Gaius would have carried him with much more care, but there was no other option now. He gently lifted the three kobolds in his arms, then turned to Blossom.

“Stay here! I’ll send someone to come and get you!” With that, he took off, running for the village as fast as he could.

★

“Light the fireplace and boil some water! You there, go fetch some water and a bowl! Hurry, you numbskulls! Ladies, go grab some clean cloth, as much as you can!”

Fog's house was packed with as many villagers as could fit inside, and the village elder shouted commands at the group.

"Hopping Rabbit, go and fetch your medicines! Especially some bewitching herb! You there, go outside and build a fire near the house! It'll please the fire spirits and ward off the evil ones! And it'll attract the spirits of healing!"

One by one, the villagers took off to fulfill their respective tasks. Gaius, Sashalia, Darke, Fishbone's parents, and the elder stood over the wounded, watching over them with clenched fists and bated breath.

"This is my fault. The children got far too used to my being here...they stopped feeling wary of humans..."

"Shut it, you big oaf!" the elder rebuked him. Gaius hung his head. Sashalia thought to comfort him, but once she saw the clear anguish in his face, she hesitated.

...The situation was dire. It was clear how terrible Fog's and Emon's wounds were, but no one knew the extent of the two boys' internal injuries. To treat them, they would need a specialized facility, operated by a sorcerer trained in the healing arts—none of which they had in the village.

The village elder had done what he could, calling to the spirits of the departed, but they could not heal such wounds; spirit magic could only accelerate one's natural healing ability to suppress poison, rot, and other such ailments.

Emon opened his eyes, whispering, "Sa...shalia..."

"Emon?! Don't push yourself, you need to rest!"

"I'll...be...fine..."

"Fine?! You should see yourself! Your head, it's...!"

"I said...I'll be...fine! Dwarves...don't lie!" Emon growled as he struggled to hoist himself to his feet, wobbling like a newborn attempting to walk for the first time. He slumped against the wall and dragged himself forward little by little.

Sashalia leapt up to help him, and together they made their way to Emon's bag. He collapsed onto his knees and fumbled through his belongings until he felt his fingers close around what he was looking for, then held it up: the small bottle of red liquid.

"That's the medicine we talked about before, isn't it?" Sashalia said as Emon held it out to her.

"Use it..." Despite his protests, it was clear Emon was pushing himself harder than he should have been. As soon as Sashalia took the bottle from him, he sank back down onto the floor.

"Ye can...use it on their wounds...to seal 'em up...or make them...drink it...to heal their...insides..."

"How much should I give them?!"

“Dwarves need...tae drink the whole bottle...but if ye’re...applyin’ it to wounds...ye’ll know when it’s enough...”

“Okay, Emon,” Sashalia said, squeezing the bottle tightly. “I’ll make sure the others get the proper dose.”

“Than—” Emon had meant to thank her, but could no longer hold on and passed out once again.

“The spirits say they can feel the magic in that medicine! Hurry up and give it to them!”

“Over here, Lady Denan!” Darke waved her over.

But they’d all realized the same fact: there simply was not enough medicine for everyone. Only a little remained, just as it had when Emon had shown it to the rest of the group. Even taking the kobolds’ smaller bodies into account, there was not even enough to treat one dwarf, let alone the three kobolds.

Gaius was the first one to break the silence. “What if you gave each of them a little bit of the medicine...? Just enough to keep them alive?”

Sashalia shook her head. “That might work with normal medicine, but this is magical. I’ve read about similar potions in the castle library: this one most likely works by catalyzing the magical elements in the body. You need to administer a fixed amount in proportion to the patient’s body mass. Anything less than that, and the magical reaction might not occur.”

“Then...”

“Like Emon said, we should be able to heal Fog’s wound with this, because we can observe its effects. But for the boys’ internal injuries...” Sashalia’s expression turned even darker. “...all we can do is try it and hope for the best.”

With each kobold they treated, the others’ chances of survival diminished greatly—that was the part she couldn’t bring herself to say.

Darke, on the other hand, asked the question that had been hanging over their heads: “Sir Gaius, Lady Denan...who should we treat first?”

If they used all the medicine on one, they might be saved, but that would mean leaving the others to die.

Gaius’s reply came without hesitation. “The children, of course.”

Sashalia blurted out in surprise, “But Sir Gaius, that means Fog will...” Even though she understood Fog would want them to do the same, her heart hadn’t yet accepted it.

As if to dispel her conflicted emotions, the village elder spoke with a powerful conviction. “He’s right, young lady! Even Gaius has good ideas now and again.”

“But Fog...!”

“I’m so sorry, Fog...if only I’d found you sooner...”

At the sound of their voices, Fog’s eyelids slowly fluttered open.

“I’m...so glad you did...that was enough for me. So, please...just do it...it hurts...”

With that, Darke quickly poured a tiny amount of the medicine onto a spoon and carried it up to Fluff’s mouth.

The magic seemed to take effect as soon as she poured the medicine in. The liquid was absorbed almost instantly, and soon, they could see a faint red glow emanating from the skin beneath Fluff’s fur. They began to hear a soft sound reminiscent of a chanting voice, and his whole body grew noticeably warmer. His irregular breathing soon settled down and before long his anguished face started to look as though he was sleeping peacefully.

“It looks like it worked...!” Darke exclaimed and everyone else heaved sighs of relief. She quickly gave Fishbone a dose as well, and his pain also seemed to wane. Behind her, Red Eye and his wife swooped down to scoop up their son into an embrace.

Fog watched the emotional scene then beckoned to Gaius. “If I don’t...make it...I’m counting on you to...take care of the kids...and the village... After all, you’re...one of us.”

“...You can trust me.”

It took Fog all the strength she had to utter those words; like Emon, she soon fell back into unconsciousness.

“Even with the bewitching herb there to help numb the wound, that kind of pain would be too much for anyone to bear,” said the elder. “It’s for the best that she isn’t awake.”

It was time for the final treatment. Everyone looked down at Darke’s hands. As they’d expected, they saw only the tiniest amount of red liquid remaining in the bottle, even less than she’d administered to each child.

“We should apply it to her wound, like Emon said,” prompted Gaius.

“That does seem to be our only option, but...even if I attempt to pour the medicine onto the wound, I cannot ensure it will reach all the way down. And once the medicine heals over the surface, we’ll never know whether or not it truly fixed everything.”

“That’s true. I can ask the spirits to help, but if Fog’s body doesn’t have enough strength left to recover...”

Though imperfect, it was the only plan they had, as Darke had said, so she and the elder soon set about implementing it. Darke tilted the bottle over Fog’s abdomen and poured the rest of the medicine onto the stab wound as the village elder resumed his communication with the spirits. Everyone then waited to see if Fog’s body could take care of the rest. In the end, her fate would come down to her own

strength.

★

Fog awoke with a small groan, as though she'd been taking an afternoon nap. On the side of her makeshift bed sat Gaius, cradling the still-sleeping Fluff in his arms, and Blossom, who couldn't stop sniffing.

"Oh man, was I asleep...? I need to get started on dinner, or else..." Fog's face was peaceful and relaxed.

"That's right," Gaius replied, smiling kindly down at her. Fog was still under the anaesthetic effects of the bewitching herb; she had no recollection of what had happened, at least for the moment.

"Fluff looks as doozy as ever when he sleeps. Gosh, I feel so out of it...Blossom? Is it alright if I make kobroth again tonight?"

The young girl's head was slumped forward, and she gave the tiniest nod in reply.

"Good...I'm just going to get a little more sleep before I get started on that... Can you tuck Fluff in for me? Make sure he gets all wrapped up in his blanket."

Blossom gave another almost imperceptible nod.

"Wonder if I have enough...vegetables..." Fog's voice trailed off as if falling asleep—she'd lost consciousness once again. For a moment, a heavy silence filled the small house.

Suddenly, Fog's body twitched violently. Her face, which had been peaceful just seconds before, contorted in agony. Gaius held her down to keep her from thrashing, a different sort of pain etched in his face.

She'd lost too much blood. Her body couldn't hold out for much longer. Even with the bewitching herb to lessen the pain, even after passing out, the fact that she was still suffering so much was a terrible sign.

The village elder leaned in close to Gaius. "The spirits say they've done all they can."

Gaius closed his eyes.

"Miss Sashalia. Darke. I'd like you to take the children over to Red Eye's house."

The two women nodded. Darke took Fluff from Gaius's arms as Sashalia held a hand out to Blossom, and the four of them left the house. Gaius waited until he was sure they were out of earshot before turning back to the elder.

"We should end her pain."

"Yes...she's fought hard. But can you do it?"

Gaius nodded. He reached down to his waist, where he wore his short sword, and unsheathed it. Gripping the blade with both hands,

he held it up to eye level and said, in a voice that seemed to come from deep within him:

“It’s something I’ve done many times before.”

★

From the outskirts of the village, columns of smoke rose up into the star-filled sky.

Several stakes had been driven into the ground and were now burning gently.

According to kobold folklore, all souls on this world came down from the stars, and would eventually return.

The smoke was said to help carry them back to the skies in a ritual called the “star send-off.” Sending the deceased back home allowed those who remained to remember the lives of the departed and say one final farewell.

One man and two children stared up at the smoke disappearing into the sky, watching Fog return to her place among those twinkling lights.

Tears dripped from Blossom’s muzzle as she sniffled again and again. Fluff had recovered and was now awake, but did not yet fully comprehend what was happening.

Gaius sat down in the grass and pulled the two in close, crossing his legs so they could each sit on one of his knees. The other villagers had all returned home, most likely to give them some time alone.

He drew Stingfeather and plunged it deep into the earth. “My offering to you.”

With a sigh that seemed to come from the very bottom of his heart, he brought a hand up to each child’s back and stroked them as the three continued to gaze up at the waning smoke.

“Fog was an incredibly brave, magnificent warrior...”

Gaius’s voice hitched.

“...and above all else, she was your mother, right down to the very last moment.”

He looked down at the children, a small smile on his face. Blossom and Fluff gazed back up at him in confusion, sniffing.

“...It’s all right if you don’t understand. I just wanted to tell you that.” He brought a finger up to Fluff’s face and stroked him under his chin. “We can talk about it again when you get older.”

The three turned their gazes back to the stars once more.

Long after the fires had burned out and the smoke stopped rising from the smoldering wood, they watched as Fog’s soul made its way back to the stars.

★

After the dust and smoke from Fog's funeral had settled, all the adults of the village gathered in the town square along with Gaius. The topic of the meeting was what their next moves should be—and how they needed to begin acting from now on.

Sashalia stood beside Gaius. Emon had also wanted to attend, but he had stayed in bed at everyone's insistence to continue his recovery. Darke had stayed behind as well, to console the heartbroken children.

"So they were adventurers..." Red Eye said, a hand on his chin. "I'm glad you got rid of them all. At least there's that."

He'd known Fog since they were children, but right now, the village needed him—he couldn't allow himself to succumb to his grief.

They'd inspected the adventurers' belongings and learned of their affiliation with the Ryburgh Adventurers' Guild. Just as Fog had learned, the kobolds' sharp noses confirmed that they were indeed the group that had destroyed their last home. Judging from the several large burlap sacks they all carried, they'd most likely come to pillage any valuables the kobolds might have had.

"Gaius, you think there's a chance any humans will come for payback?" Red Eye asked.

"Adventurers will go to any means to get what they want, no matter how underhanded. But that also means they won't do something if they see no benefit in it for themselves. They might have some kind of code of honor, but...it isn't strong enough to make most willing to brave the Greatwood."

Sashalia nodded. "It's just assumed that anyone who goes missing in the forest was killed by a magical beast."

Red Eye said, "But Gaius killed all of them. Doesn't that mean our village being here is still a secret?"

Sashalia said, "It's very likely they told someone where they were going. And there's no guarantee that was their entire party, either."

"So basically, we could get hit again at any time?"

"Yes. However, at least we know the direction they'll come from: the dried-out river."

"How do you know that, Sashalia?"

"Kobolds can freely traverse the forest, but to humans the Greatwood is something to be avoided at almost all costs. So if someone absolutely had to go any distance into it, they'd take the easiest route through it they could." Once she'd explained it that way, the kobolds nodded in understanding.

"That's why I suggest that we dig a trench around where the riverbed enters the clearing. We should also assign lookouts in shifts to keep watch. That way, no intruders would go unnoticed. The lookouts can light a signal fire to alert the village—although that would also tip off any enemies, and could be hampered by the

weather... We'd need someone who can run back and relay messages and so on, so ideally there would be three lookouts in position at any one time, in two different locations if possible. That should provide the bare minimum level of surveillance, I think."

Sashalia was right to consider these preventative measures, but the village had been short-handed even after Gaius and the others arrived. To take able-bodied villagers away from the other daily necessities—building, hunting, farming—seemed unfeasible. Even if no one came to loot the village, the kobolds would surely succumb to the strain of remaining on high alert and keeping watch at all hours.

"You know, Sashalia, you're smarter than I thought." Rain Grass nodded,

"Oh, well, thank y—wait, 'than you thought'?"

Instead of responding, Rain Grass turned to Gaius and said, "Even if someone comes looking for revenge, we have you here with us so we'll be fine! I heard from Emon that your people used to call you the 'Slayer of Fifty.'"

Gaius grimaced. "That was nothing but an awful rumor that spread after the war. It wasn't that I cut down that many people at the same time. My reach is longer than most, that's true, but I doubt I could defend against dozens of assailants at once. And..."

"And'...?"

As long as Gaius could still swing a sword, he would fight. But he wasn't the same young knight he'd been twenty, or even ten, years ago; the years had begun to take their toll, and any injury or illness that might befall him would take him much longer to recover from. Gaius had to admit to himself that he could not defend the village single-handedly; staking all their hopes on him was far too risky.

"N-No, it's nothing." He shook his head, both to dispel their queries and to clear the thought from his mind.

Fog had been right to suggest that every adult in the village learn how to defend themselves. As things were, Gaius had doubts that any five or six kobolds would have been able to take down even one of the adventurers that had attacked. Whether or not any of the others would ever grow to be as skilled as she had been, the most important goal now was to close that gap as much as possible before any other assailants could arrive.

Gaius cleared his throat before speaking up again. "In addition to keeping watch, we should also prepare ourselves for combat. I can train anyone who is willing to learn."

"Yeah!"

"Count me in!"

"I thought you'd never say it!"

Red Eye, Rain Grass, and the other adults all nodded and voiced

their agreement. All but one: the village elder, who stood glaring at Gaius, his gaze burning with even more anger than when the man had first arrived in the village.

“Have you all forgotten already? It’s *his* fault. If he’d never showed up here, the children would have run from those humans! Fog might not have died!”

Gaius flinched, but said nothing. He felt the exact same way.

Rain Grass, on the other hand, shouted, “You shut your mouth right now!” He stormed right up to the elder and shoved the old kobold to the ground. “How many do you think we’d have lost without Gaius? Huh?! You tell me!”

“Hah! He’s still nothing but a human. If things had gotten that bad he’d have turned tail and run away!”

“‘Run away’...? You’re gonna accuse someone else of running away? *You*?!”

“That’s enough, Rain Grass! Don’t say any more!” Red Eye rushed forward to stop his friend, who had been advancing on the village elder; other kobolds jumped in to help him hold Rain Grass back.

Gaius merely stood there with his eyes closed, his mouth a thin, hard line.

★

Wyatt’s personal office was on the second floor of the Ryburgh Adventurers’ Guild. The desk and chair were purely utilitarian and clearly not selected for comfort or style, but landscapes painted by a popular artist lined the walls and an antique vase sat on a shelf in the corner. The room’s strange juxtaposition of austerity and adornment reflected its owner.

Wyatt sat at the desk, a map dotted with numerous x-marks spread before him. He tapped one in irritation as he muttered under his breath, “McArdle should have returned from his job by now...”

The dispute for the leadership of House Zigan was on the verge of all-out war between Keighley’s and Dugard’s forces. Loyalties were split in roughly equal amounts between the house vassals, but Keighley’s personal forces beat out her younger brother’s in sheer numbers. Recently, Dugard had begun recruiting the aid of mercenaries to gain the upper hand, which in turn made Keighley eager to settle the matter once and for all before she lost her numerical superiority. Sending McArdle and his band of rogues to lay waste to that settlement wearing Dugard’s crest had been Wyatt’s way of moving things along. He’d won Keighley’s trust by eagerly taking up many shady jobs just like it.

Despite his achievements in the Five-Year War, when you came right down to it, the elites still looked at Wyatt and saw nothing more

than a social climber of common birth. He needed something more than military exploits in order to earn the recognition he craved, which is why he had sought out the position of guildmaster. Though he presided over a bunch of adventurers that could only charitably be called “competent,” it was still an extraordinary feat for someone without political connections to attain such a post.

Together with this achievement, the imminent infighting would kill two birds with one stone; Wyatt could rack up even more recognition for his feats on the battlefield while also earning even more of Keighley’s favor by helping her wipe out the vassals of House Zigan that opposed her. The Adventurers’ Guild was also a good source of manpower, which he’d been ordered to gather by Keighley.

She’d also secured assurances from the prime minister that the king—his son-in-law—would not interfere with House Zigan’s affairs. Keighley’s victory was all but assured on all fronts. All that remained was for the armed conflict to break out, where Wyatt would prove himself before the nobility of Igris. This time, they’d have no choice but to acknowledge his worth. Everything was falling into place...

...so why was he so frustrated?

In his heart of hearts, he knew exactly what—or who—was the cause.

Lord Beldarus. The man who, despite his illegitimate birth, earned himself the title of baron with nothing but his blade. Wyatt had admired the Black Rose of Igris like no one else. Gaius Beldarus was the shining example of the principle Wyatt had once lived by: that one could climb the ladder to such heights through valorous deeds of arms.

And Lord Beldarus had thrown all of that away without the slightest trace of regret. As though he’d never wanted it in the first place. As though he’d never realized how valuable it all was. When he’d heard this, Wyatt felt as though everything he held dear had been rejected. The words were like filthy boots trampling over all his struggles and determination, his past, even his very existence. In that moment, Wyatt felt as though he could have killed the man.

As the encounter replayed itself in Wyatt’s head, the anger filled his heart once more, threatening to overflow. Wyatt brought his fist down hard on the desk in an attempt to vent some of his black rage, making the ink bottle resting near the map jump slightly, then swept a stack of books across the desk and sent them fluttering to the floor. He still had enough restraint, however, to lash out in a calculated way; he’d purposely spared the ink bottle to avoid the mess, but targeted the books, which would be much easier to pick up.

After Wyatt was sure his anger had abated, he rose from his chair and walked over to the scattered books. He knelt down and calmly

stacked them, snorting in self-derision at his childish fit, then took them over to the bookshelf.

This one goes here, and this one is...yes, over here...

As Wyatt held the last book in his hands, his eyes passed over the faded title printed on its well worn spine: "Iron Knight Iwanoshin," a dwarven illustrated book that had enjoyed some popularity years ago.

"Now this takes me back," Wyatt chuckled to himself, then searched for the book's proper place on the shelf. His father had brought it home to him as a birthday present when he was a young boy, and he and his friends had re-read it countless times. The story itself was very simple: a valiant tale of a noble knight triumphing over evil and saving the weak. Still, it had left a huge impression on him, and in truth this story was the whole reason he'd taken up the sword in the first place.

He'd worked himself to the bone and realized he had true talent even before he saw real combat. He'd slain many knights in the war, and managed to become one himself thanks to his service.

Wyatt flipped idly through the book, the breeze from the fluttering pages tickling his face. "'Dwarves never lie,' huh..." he laughed to himself once again as he recalled Iwanoshin's catchphrase.

You could say this book made me who I am today.

Yes, this tale set him on his current path. And yet...Wyatt tried to put himself back in the shoes of himself as a boy and recall just what it was he'd wanted when he'd picked up a sword for the first time. No matter how he searched through his memories, he couldn't recall just what that motivation was.

★

Cyril was in the best mood he'd been in for a long time as he made his way back to Ryburgh. He walked with a spring in his step, feeling as though he could jump for joy with every stride.

Theron's dead! I'm free! And I didn't have to lift a finger to get rid of him! Now I can finally go home! He rejoiced on the inside as he pumped his fists in triumph.

Cyril and Theron never did get along, even as children. He'd never wanted to tag along with Theron the way he had, helping him as he fled from one domain to the next.

Unfortunately for Cyril, Theron had known his darkest secret.

It had all started one summer, when Cyril was eighteen.

Lily, the girl he'd loved, had been unfaithful. Cyril killed her in a blind rage. He'd then carried her body into the woods in the hopes that he could disguise her death as a magical beast attack, the kind of thing that happened all the time out on the frontier. The whole plan had gone off without a hitch...except that Theron had seen the cover-

up.

And so, Cyril had been forced into the life of an adventurer, living life as Theron's lackey under the threat of having his secret exposed, doing whatever he was told.

When Theron had insisted on venturing back into the Greatwood, Cyril knew this was his chance at freedom—there was no way he'd let it slip by, even if it meant the deaths of the rest of the party. In fact, he welcomed that outcome.

Cyril hummed to himself as he walked into the Adventurers' Guild, strolling up to the clerk's desk to report their deaths and submit his resignation.

★

“Heard about what happened to your party. It's a real shame.”

Cyril looked up from his forms and found himself face-to-face with an enormous man, even larger than Graeme. His head was shaved, and his face looked as though it was etched from stone.

“Oh, Hubert. Thanks...we went into the Greatwood on a survey job, but these dog goblins swarmed us. There were too many of them, and the others, they...”

The “surveys” Cyril referred to were jobs regularly offered to adventurers all over Igris. Just as a splinter is pushed out of the skin, every so often, a strange, ark-like ship would emerge from the Greatwood. They were almost always empty, but on occasion they contained valuables: ancient relics, mythrils, and other treasures. A religious order even claimed to have once found an angel slumbering in one of the ships; it was also not uncommon to find dangerous magical beasts on board.

Adventurers were dispatched as a preliminary measure, to assess the situation aboard these arks. Domains would outsource the task, enticing adventurers to brave the woods and report their findings in exchange for rewards. The practice had become so widespread that some adventures specialized solely in such jobs.

“I see. A damn shame, that. You must be real cut up about it.” Hubert nodded to himself as though he already knew that for a fact. Even if Cyril *had* been lamenting their deaths, he never would have said so. He knew that Hubert couldn't care less about his feelings. If anything, he would have enjoyed Cyril's sorrow, had there been any—he was the type to revel in the misfortune of others. Cyril wanted as little to do with the man as possible.

“Yes, I'm truly shocked. Now, I really should finish these forms, so if you'll excuse me...” He turned back to his paperwork, but a huge hand clapped down hard on his shoulder.

“Hold it, pal. You know your buddy Theron and his gang owed me

money, right?"

"I-I do, but I never borrowed a single coin from you..."

"True, true. But I've got something here you oughta look at."

Hubert reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He spread it out on the table before Cyrus, revealing a promissory note signed by Theron.

"See this? You're listed as the guarantor."

"*Whaaat?!*" Cyril's eyes threatened to pop out of his head. He couldn't deny it—there was his name, clear as day. "B-B-But I never signed this!"

"I don't give a damn *who* wrote it." Hubert sneered, baring his pointed teeth like a shark who'd caught up to the wounded seal he'd been chasing down. "That's your name, and that means *you've* got until the end of the month to pay up."

Cyril cursed Theron again and again in his heart. If his "childhood friend" weren't already lying dead in the woods, he'd strangle the man himself. His vision swam as his heart hammered in his chest.

What do I do? What do I do?!

"Don't think you can weasel your way out of this, either," Hubert leaned in and hissed in his ear. Cyril was on the verge of full-blown panic, until—

—at the last second, a flash of inspiration struck him.

"...No, I won't run away. In fact, I have an idea of how to pay you back in full. Maybe even more than Theron owed you."

"Oh? Out with it, then." Hubert's terrible smirk was back, only this time, Cyril smiled along with him.

The answer was so clear, so simple: all he had to do was take Hubert to the dog village as well. That monster of a man would take care of him, just like he got rid of Theron and the others. And if by some miracle Hubert were to kill the man instead, then he could raid the village and get his money's worth.

Cyril's panic had completely vanished, as though nothing had ever gone wrong at all. He hid his malicious plan behind a beaming smile as he sat down and drew up an entirely different plan with Hubert.

★

"Hubert wants to go and avenge Theron...?" When he heard the guild clerk's report, Wyatt was somewhat taken aback. He knew exactly the kind of man Hubert was, and only kept him around for his talents at drawing in—and trapping—new recruits.

"It doesn't matter. Tell him he can go if he wants...on second thought, don't." The clerk froze, having turned to leave the office.

"Theron's party died on the outskirts of the Greatwood...around here, was it?" Wyatt pointed to the map, still spread across his desk.

“That’s right,” the clerk nodded. “That’s what they say.”

Wyatt rubbed his chin in thought. This was convenient for him—extremely so. Just as he’d sent McArdle to lay siege in Dugard’s name, he could round up more adventurers and have them do the same along the way; the point on the map was very close to the site of McArdle’s latest job. He’d outfit them in armor with Dugard’s crest and send them off to light another pitiful settlement up in flames. They’d kill off all but a few of the residents and let the survivors spread the news of another act of atrocity.

“All right.” Wyatt looked up from the map. “Tell them I’m coming with them. Put out a guild order to all available adventurers—we’ll need the manpower. And tell Hubert to let me know when he wants to set out.”

★

Some time after the humans’ plan began to come together, back at the kobold village square...

“Hey, gramps, let’s get back tae trainin’ already,” a perfectly healthy Emon called out to Gaius, who sat whittling a tree branch.

“We can train some more after I finish this,” Gaius replied. “I’m going to show the kobolds how to lay traps.”

“What’s that stick for?”

“A pitfall.”

“What, are ye and the wee ones gonna play a prank on the elder?”

“No, nothing as silly as that. It’s to thwart any potential invaders. I’m sharpening sticks to plant in the bottom of the pit. If one catches an enemy in the leg, they’ll be unable to continue on.”

“Crivvens...and how about this prickly thing, all wrapped up in rope?”

“We’re going to hang those in between the trees at the forest’s edge. When someone trips a rope attached to that log, it’ll swing down like a pendulum and strike them.”

“And this?”

“That will fire arrows when someone walks into this string here.”

“How about all these?”

“You drive these stakes into a flexible tree branch, bend it backward, then tie this rope like so. When someone steps on this part, it releases the branch, which springs back and drives the stakes into their torso.”

“Gramps, weren’t you a knight?”

“I was, yes.”

“Don’t knights fight all, y’know, dignified and one-on-one? Real proper-like?”

Gaius laughed. “Only in stories. Well, not quite...there certainly

are a good number of knights that still think that way. They believe a warrior's most noble calling is to best their opponent in direct, open combat."

"But you don't agree?"

"I don't," Gaius replied as he resumed whittling. "Although I can see why people admire those who live by the sword."

"Then what's so wrong with it?"

"Those who choose that path are free to do as they see fit. But Emon, most of the time, those who fight aren't motivated by such lofty ideals."

Gaius set down the newly completed stake, then picked up another branch and set about sharpening it as he spoke.

"Many, many people charge into battle thinking only of achieving glory—and they die pointlessly, blinded by their ambitions. That's why I don't concern myself with 'knightly' ways."

Wood shavings flew this way and that.

"A head-on battle is only a good idea when your forces outnumber theirs, or when there's no other option. The best outcome is to avoid combat altogether—and if that's impossible, to halt their advance before the two sides meet. If it comes to that, one should aim to ambush the enemy and overwhelm them before they have the chance to recover."

"I dunno if a knight should be talkin' like this..."

"It's the truth—and I knew you'd be upset with me if I told you this during training," Gaius said, looking back down at his work with a small smile on his face.

★

"...and all of these traps can be made from materials found in the forest."

Gaius stood before a group of kobold men, teaching them how to make the traps he'd showed Emon. They nodded, eager to set about making them right away.

"All right! Let's get started!" One cried out, but Red Eye held up a hand.

"Wait. First, we should scout out the best spots to set them. It'd be fastest to make the parts back home and carry them out to the forest once we know where they're going."

Right on cue, the village elder scoffed. "You're all a bunch of simpletons, buying into these pea-brained human schemes."

Sashalia did her best to avoid any more argument by ignoring the comment. "That's right, Red Eye, the forest is so vast that we can't just set them anywh—"

"Listen, I've had it up to here with you," Rain Grass cut her off to

point an angry finger at the elder. “How many times do we have to tell you to shut it?!”

It seemed he still burned with anger over his last confrontation with the older kobold. Since the others had stepped in between them that time, he hadn’t been able to vent all his anger, and it flared back to life now at the elder’s latest derisive remark. He marched forward, pushing those in front of him out of the way, and delivered a swift punch to the old kobold’s jaw.

Or, at least, that’s what he’d set out to do. With surprising agility, the elder stepped out of the way and countered with a swift left jab into Rain Grass’s stomach. The blow sent him tumbling backwards, and he crashed to the ground at Gaius’s feet. No one had ever seen the village elder move like that.

“You old piece of—I’m gonna—!” Rain Grass sputtered as he scrambled back onto his feet.

“Still learning how to use your words, little pup? Just try and hit me again!”

Gaius grabbed Rain Grass by both arms before he could act on whatever threat he was trying to verbalize. He picked the kobold up, sat down cross-legged and set him down in his lap. He then began to vigorously pet and scratch Rain Grass’s arms, belly, and cheeks, all the while murmuring, “There, there. Who’s a good boy?”

Rain Grass tried to wriggle free, snarling “Let me go! Get off me! I *said* let me go...!” Before long, his struggling grew more and more languid, and his growls turned into murmurs of satisfaction. He settled into Gaius’s lap, his foot occasionally kicking and twitching.

Gaius massaged and kneaded his face, gently pulling at the excess skin on his cheeks. Not only had he managed to completely dispel Rain Grass’s anger, the kobold himself was practically melting into a puddle before everyone’s eyes.

“Oh, wow...”

“That looks...kinda nice...”

“Yeah, I wanna go next!”

“How’s it feel, Rain Grass?”

“Yeah, tell us!”

Rain Grass murmured, “...like a bride just after her wedding night.”

“Eww!”

Everyone who had been leaning in immediately backed away like oil being parted by water. Sashalia, who had been standing off to the side with a strange expression, tried to dispel some of the discomfort with an awkward, unnaturally loud cough.

“R-Right, so about those traps...”

Once again, she was interrupted—this time, by a terrified voice

shouting at them from the distance.

“We’re in trouble!”

Everyone turned in the direction of the shout to see a young kobold running at full speed toward the village square; she was one of the lookouts on duty that day, and even before she reached them, everyone knew what her presence meant. Even Rain Grass, a puddle of contentment just moments before, snapped to attention with a grim look on his face.

“Humans! There’s a group of humans in the forest!”

★

Many, many years ago, at a time when fully equipped armies were a rare sight...

After suffering several crushing losses at the hands of the neighboring kingdoms, Igris’s royal family devised a last-ditch effort to bolster their defenses. They gathered their most elite soldiers from domains throughout the kingdom, outfitted them in chainmail armor, and sent them off to battle. This new unit went on to achieve one glorious victory after another, and thus, the Knights of the Chain was born.

As time went on, the Knights lay the chainmail to rest, instead choosing to wear jacks, leather vests interwoven with hundreds of small metal plates. A jack was less durable, but easier to make and maintain. It was also easier to put on and take off, which could mean the difference between life and death when tending to a comrade’s wounds on the battlefield. One could also decorate their jack, and they made the wearer look somewhat less intimidating—both of which made them an ideal choice of armor, as the Knights were constantly seen going to and from the king’s castle.

...Unfortunately, they tended to smell rather unpleasant, as they were impossible to wash.

Gaius, Sashalia, and Darke were busy outfitting themselves in their knight’s armor, helping each other fasten ties here and clasp buckles there. Each wore a jack, leather guards, and gauntlets.

Darke had also put on her brimmed cap and had thrown a mantle over her shoulders. “I believe we’re ready to get into formation. Shall we make for the village square?”

With that, the three former knights left Fog’s house, with Emon trailing behind them, sword in hand.

“Ahh, I’ve been waitin’ to put me skills to use!” he beamed, bursting with excitement at the thought of chivalrous combat.

Unfortunately, Gaius did not share his enthusiasm. “Emon, you won’t be coming with us—we need you to stay here.”

“What?! Why?! I need tae go avenge Fog, too!” The clear shock

and hurt in his voice showed how unprepared he was to hear these orders.

“That’s exactly why I can’t bring you along,” Gaius replied.

Darke put a hand on Emon’s shoulder. “Don’t be selfish, now. Please try to understand.”

But Emon pushed her hand away and blurted out, “Don’t be treatin’ me like a wee lad!”

“This isn’t about vengeance,” said Gaius. “We’re going to negotiate—to ask them to leave this village alone.”

“Ye won’t have tae negotiate for anythin’ if ye jest kill the whole lot of ’em!”

This time, Sashalia replied. “It isn’t that simple. Last time, Sir Gaius only had to take down a few adventurers. But, according to the scouts, this time there are well over forty humans. And even if we did manage to beat them back, all they would have to do is come back with even more people. Then what would we do?”

“D-Do our best and beat them all?”

Gaius replied with a voice that was gentle yet firm. “The more we fight, the greater our losses, in numbers and in morale. The kobolds wouldn’t have been able to repel those adventurers, let alone the entire guild. These people might return with an entire town’s worth of forces, or they may even enlist the aid of one of House Zigan’s armies. I’ve seen matters escalate to that degree before.”

“That’s why they need to try and negotiate first,” said Sashalia. “You aren’t as used to the forest as the kobolds, so you need to stay here. If worse comes to worst, you need to help them get to safety.”

Reluctantly, she left Gaius’s side and walked up to Emon. “And I will, too.”

“But... Ye mean big sis is goin’ and ye’re not?”

Sashalia winced at the question but soon recovered, replying with a nod. Seeing her do her best to suppress her own disappointment, Emon heaved a deep sigh and gave a very reluctant nod of his own.

“Alrigh’...but next time, ye better take me with you.”

“I’m hoping there won’t be a next time,” Gaius replied. “Miss Sashalia, I’m leaving the village to you.”

“Understood.” As though willing her emotions to settle down, Sashalia brought a fist to her chest, saluting Gaius and Darke as they departed.

★

When Gaius and Darke arrived at the village square, they were greeted with the sight of around fifty kobolds armed with spears, bows, and other weapons. They’d gathered the strongest villagers, most of whom were from the hunting party; most of the group was

huddled around something. Their wives, mothers, and children stood around them, waiting to bid them farewell.

“So that’s human armor, huh...” Red Eye looked up to greet the three as they approached. On the ground was a map Gaius had drawn, based on the kobolds’ description of the surrounding forest. Two stones rested on the map: a black one to represent the incoming band of humans, and a white one to mark their own forces.

“One of the boys tracking them’s just come back. He says they’re on foot, but moving pretty quickly—at this rate, they’ll be here before sundown.”

“I see...and I heard someone say they weren’t very well equipped, is that right?” Gaius turned to the young kobold scout, who nodded. “Then they’re either a band of adventurers or mercenaries, most likely the former. An army would be more heavily armored.”

“And even with the path leading them through the forest, I doubt they’ll want to stop and set up camp,” Darke said, ending with her peculiar cackle. The incoming humans would most likely march through the day, spend the night in the village once they’d concluded their terrible business, then head back to Ryburgh in the morning.

“There’s something I want to make sure of,” said Rain Grass, crossing his arms. “We’re just going to be hiding nearby, right?” Like Emon, he’d been strongly opposed to the prospect of negotiations at first, but was now doing his best to hold back his temper and cooperate.

“That’s right,” Gaius replied. “If all goes well, no one will need to draw their weapons. But if the worst does come to pass...”

The village elder tried to interject once again, but this time Darke stepped forward to disable him with scratches and belly rubs. All the other kobolds nodded, the group buzzing with voices of affirmation. Behind them, Sashalia looked on, visibly restless.

★

“Now how the hell did *this* happen?” grumbled Hubert, a sour look on his already grim face. Cyril shot him a sidelong glare and on the inside, spat back, *That’s what I want to know!*

The two walked side by side, bringing up the rear as their group walked along the dried riverbed. They had originally only planned to bring along an additional ten guild members. However, when Wyatt had announced he would be accompanying them, the numbers had swelled to nearly fifty adventurers.

On the one hand, their numbers meant they did not have to fear magical beast attacks, and they would be more than able to completely overwhelm the village of dogs that Cyril had described. There was one downside, though...

“At this rate, my cut of the loot isn’t gonna be more than a few coins!” Hubert growled. Guild rules stipulated that all gains were to be divided equally among the party, and with the guildmaster himself present, there was no chance he could take the lion’s share as he had planned. This meant that Cyril’s plan to claw his way out of the hole Theron had dug for him was also unraveling.

Damn it all... Cyril cursed Wyatt inwardly. *It was the perfect plan... Why is my luck so terrible?!*

Whether Hubert stole his money from those dog-goblins, or whether that terrifying farmer killed him, Cyril would have been freed either way. Now, though, he could see neither a way to get rid of Hubert nor any other way to scrape together the money he needed. Cyril wanted nothing more than to scream and shout his frustration, but he just barely managed to content himself with the occasional kick at the sandy riverbed.

Hubert stepped in front of him, bringing his face close to Cyril’s as he whispered, “Hey. You’ve already scouted this area out, right?” His breath reeked.

“O-Oh...I did. Just before our party set out.”

“Ssh! Keep it down!” Hubert hissed. “That means you can find us a shortcut to the village, right?”

“Yes...I think I could. We’d have to leave the path and cut through the woods, but I could lead us there. But why...?”

“You and me are gonna get there first, steal their most valuable stuff, and stash it away somewhere.”

Cyril was genuinely impressed, and pleased that something good had come from Hubert’s vast greed for once. “Would they just let us go off on our own like that?”

“I’ll leave it to you to come up with a good excuse. Tell them we volunteer to go on ahead as scouts or something, or that there might be traps set up.”

“What do I do if the guildmaster says no?”

“Wyatt’s not that bothered. Killing a few goblins is gonna be a breeze with this many people, and he knows it.”

“But—”

“Cyril, Cyril, Cyril, don’t tell me you forgot? If we can’t make good money off of this, *you’re* the one who’s screwed.”

Tch... He’s right, though. All Cyril had to do was bear the guildmaster’s annoyance for a little while. If their backup plan worked, his chances of having that farmer kill Hubert would greatly improve.

“All right,” he replied. “I’ll go talk to him now.”

It wasn't until the group stopped to rest that anyone noticed Hubert, Cyril, and several other people had slipped away. Wyatt had only just sat down against a tree when someone stepped forward with a message for him.

"Hubert went ahead? And took some of our men with him?" Wyatt said, frowning.

"Yes, sir," the messenger replied; she was one of the many adventurers under Hubert's thumb. "H-He said he felt bad, dragging everyone into his plan to avenge Theron and the others, and that the least he could do was to survey the rest of the path."

With a sigh of irritation, Wyatt waved the woman away. He'd expected something like this to happen, leading a ragtag group of selfish adventurers on a march like a proper army. The only surprise was that the motley crew was unraveling so soon.

Many adventurers either loved violence, or had grown up with it, which meant that one could easily find incredibly skilled fighters among their ranks. The armies of Igris's nobility, on the other hand, were packed with nothing but young upstarts as of late. In a smaller skirmish—two-on-two, or five-on-five—adventurers would come out victorious in almost every instance.

However, if a hundred of each were to do battle, a trained army would win easily. A band of lone wolves, no matter how skilled, could not best a synchronized force led by a commander. Wyatt would continue to aid Keighley and gather soldiers for her, but he was already learning just how difficult it was to control such unruly characters. Adventurers never received any formal training under an authority figure, and the more he gathered, the more they slipped out from under his thumb to do whatever they wanted.

What made an army an army was its organization; with that, even a force of thousands could operate as harmoniously as a single body. A battalion of adventurers lacked that critical element, and that made it an unwieldy weapon to wield in an actual fight. Wyatt wished he could take the time to actually train them, or at the very least figure out how best to corral them.

Maybe I should treat this monster-culling expedition like training... We're more or less marching in formation.

When he thought about it like that, the undertaking could potentially kill not just two, but three birds with one stone: it would worsen Dugard's reputation, build Wyatt's reputation, and begin turning the adventurers into a respectable unit.

These are the cards I've been dealt, so there's no sense in complaining. Just need to make them work in my favor.

Wyatt rose to his feet, announcing that their break was over as he took his place in the procession, behind the adventurers he'd assigned

to the vanguard. They'd covered a fair bit of ground, when they suddenly heard a voice from the trees.

"Pardon me. Can I have a moment of your time?"

Pushing his way through the brush, a giant of a man emerged from the trees lining their path, stepping out in front of the vanguard.

"Who are you?!" one of the adventurers shouted at him, quickly drawing his sword and pointing it at the man. His nearby comrades followed suit, preparing to attack. Of the three sorcerers preparing their magical strikes, two held staves made from precious magical substances.

"Ah, no, I didn't come here to cause any trouble." The man held his palms up in a show of peace. While he was clad in leather armor, he carried no visible weapons. Realizing this, the adventurers gradually relaxed, lowering their weapons.

"All I want is to talk," the man continued. "Could I speak with your general...or rather, your leader?"

Those in the vanguard looked to each other in uncertainty before looking back in the direction of the guildmaster. They parted as Wyatt emerged from behind them, still on horseback and with a hand on his sword hilt.

"My name is Wyatt, guildmaster of the Ryburgh Adventurers' Guild and commander of this expedition. What business do you...have...here..."

Wyatt's voice petered out as he came face to face with the intruder, and from the furrowed brows on both sides, their surprise and confusion were mutual.

"Sir Wyatt...?"

"Lord Beldarus?!"

Wyatt, however, was far more shaken by the chance encounter. He rushed to dismount his horse and walked up to Gaius Beldarus.

"So it was you coming all this way..." nodded Gaius. "I suppose I should have considered that possibility."

"Y-Yes...I organized this unit to cull some monsters. But more importantly, Lord Beldarus, what are you doing out here?!"

Unlike Wyatt, it seemed Gaius had already accepted this latest development; his demeanor and speech were as calm as usual. What struck Wyatt as even more strange than his calmness, or even his presence in the Greatwood, was an unexplainable...pressure.

His eyes, his aura, the deliberate weight behind each word—even though he was unarmed, a terrifying intent to kill radiated off of Gaius's entire body. What was more, Wyatt only began to feel this once Gaius had seen his face.

"At the end of this path lies a village of kobolds under my care. As long as you're armed, I would appreciate it if you went no further,"

Gaius declared, addressing not only the guildmaster, but the entire group.

“Kobolds?”

“What are those?” The adventurers murmured to one another, clearly confused—except for Wyatt.

“Kobolds...so that’s what those ‘dogs’ truly are. I’d read about them in a monster encyclopedia.”

“Indeed. They’ve made a home for themselves here, farming and hunting. They’re simple folk that take only what they need from the forest, and they aren’t very used to humans. Would you kindly turn back? And we would appreciate it if you didn’t come back.”

“I can’t agree to that, milord. Those beasts...those kobolds have attacked and killed humans—my guild members, no less.”

In all honesty, Wyatt could not have cared less about who attacked whom. Exterminating the kobolds was only an incidental part of his plans, but he had to at least pretend to care in front of the others.

More importantly, he did not want to do as Gaius had asked. The sludgy black resentment and pride that had seeped into his heart would not allow him to. Wyatt could not deny it: he was objecting out of emotion, not because a retreat would thwart his plans. While he acknowledged that, he barely wanted to admit it to himself because he realized how petty his reasons really were.

Instead, he replied, “As one who serves House Zigan, I can’t abide the presence of any monsters that would pose harm to the people of this domain.”

For a split second, Gaius’s brow twitched at the word “people,” but Wyatt could not fathom why.

“You’re wrong, Sir Wyatt. Your people attacked the village. That’s why there have been deaths on both sides. Those adventurers were only killed out of self-defense because they initiated the violence.”

“And do you have proof of that?”

“I witnessed it myself. I swear it on my life.”

“Oh, *do* you?! *Now* the Black Rose of Igris makes a solemn oath on his illustrious life! Of course, you can’t get more certain than that!” Wyatt burst into bitter laughter.

Hearing that moniker caused a stir among most of the adventurers behind Wyatt. The younger members of the group did not seem to understand the impact of that name, which was only natural. Fifteen years had passed since the Five-Year War; they belonged to a different generation entirely.

Wyatt regained his composure and continued. “That isn’t good enough, Lord Beldarus. It doesn’t matter why it happened. Think about it: humans have the right to slay monsters by law, but under no

circumstances is a monster justified in killing humans. How could they be? In the eyes of the law, they're in the wrong, and now we are obliged to wipe them out."

Of course, this was a twisted interpretation—most of the time, even man-eating magical beasts were left alone if they stayed away from human settlements.

"Sir Wyatt! Those rules may apply to the human world, but this is the Greatwood. Right now, we are no longer within the borders of the kingdom of Igris, let alone in Northplain."

"Then consider us in pursuit of fleeing criminals. No one would object to that."

At this point, Wyatt was pressing the issue out of pure spite. He wanted to rebel, to deny Lord Beldarus at every turn, to take everything from the man who had once exemplified everything Wyatt had ever dreamed of, only to throw it all away. Just as Gaius had trampled all over every principle he held dear, Wyatt now wanted to take away whatever it is the man was protecting and crush it entirely.

No, he had to. It was the only way to quell this terrible darkness that had overtaken him inside. If he could not do that, he was convinced he wouldn't be able to go on. His heart, the ground beneath his feet—everything would crumble away.

"So you aim to exterminate the kobolds? Just like that?"

"Correct. And you'd do well to leave here soon too, Lord Beldarus," Wyatt gloated, his expression warped with self-satisfaction. For a moment, Gaius looked at him in silence, a hard glint in his eyes. It was then replaced by a flicker of realization as something dawned on him. His next words came slowly, thoughtfully.

"...There's no reason for you to harm them. *I* killed those adventurers. If you arrest me, that should settle the matter."

Another ripple of murmurs ran through the group. Wyatt held up a hand to silence them. "Is that so...?"

His former hero replied with a nod. "Kobolds are no match for humans, let alone skilled combatants. I am the one who killed those five adventurers."

"You could have simply stayed silent and let those dogs take the fall."

"I could never let that happen. It was my fault that harm befell them. But I acknowledge that I should answer for what I have done, and so I am willing to turn myself in."

"All right, then. We'll see what the judge has to say once you plead your case." A sick joy filled Wyatt, twisting his lips into a smirk. He jabbed his chin toward Gaius, and several of the adventurers stepped forward hesitantly to restrain him.

How far the great Gaius Beldarus has fallen. Serves him right. If he'd

only stayed on the proper path, he'd still be enjoying life in the castle right now.

Gaius had knelt down to allow his captors to bind him, but he looked up to ask Wyatt, "If I come quietly, do you promise to leave the kobold village alone?"

There wasn't a single trace of hesitation or regret in his eyes. A strange pain assaulted Wyatt's chest, and he unconsciously brought a hand to his chestplate. "Why are you going so far to save a bunch of creatures...?!"

Ah, it hurt...it burned, it felt like he was being crushed. The sensation was unbearable.

Wyatt knew full well what was tormenting him: hatred. Hatred borne of a sense of inferiority...and envy. Though he loathed to admit it, once the word came to mind, he knew it was true—he envied Gaius.

Even as he sneered at the impossibly foolish man, who threw away one precious treasure after another and chose to run around with beasts in the forest, Wyatt still envied him. He envied the path Gaius had chosen for himself. That was why he'd been so agitated since their meeting.

And with that realization, in that moment, his fate as Gaius's enemy was sealed.

"...Are you listening? Sir Wyatt? Do you promise not to harm the kobolds?" Gaius's voice finally reached Wyatt through the murky haze.

"Of course," Wyatt replied with a smile. "I promise. We won't lay a finger on those dogs. Now, please don't resist arrest, Lord Beldarus."

"I'm trusting you."

"And I won't betray *your* trust."

You damned fool. Still playing the hero. Just wait—I'm going to kill every last one of them. But don't you worry, you're off to the gallows, so you'll be joining them soon. Then I won't have to feel this way anymore.

"Go on then, tie him up," Wyatt barked at the nervous adventurers. Just as they began to approach Gaius, rope in hand, a voice cried—

"Don't fall for it!"

A dog—no, a dog-like creature—burst out from the nearby trees.

"No, Rain Grass! I've taken care of it!"

"He's lying to you, Gaius! He's gonna kill us! I can smell it in his soul."

Gaius's head whipped around to face Wyatt, who chuckled.

"My soul'...? Lord Beldarus, a talking dog is interesting enough; I had no idea they could be comedians as well. Now please hold still, or my men won't be able to tie your—"

“You gotta believe me!” Rain Grass cut him off. “Even if this guy was telling the truth, there’s no way I’m gonna let you sacrifice yourself! How could I ever face Fog if I just let you go with him?!”

Wyatt watched as a small smile formed on Gaius’s face as he said, “...You’re right. I shouldn’t be doing this.” Slowly, he spread his arms out and brushed Wyatt’s underlings aside. He met the guildmaster’s gaze, this time with a different sort of resolve burning in his eyes.

“Sir Wyatt. Even after seeing the terrible deeds you ordered your men to commit, I forgot you aren’t a man to be trusted.”

“I don’t follow,” Wyatt replied, drawing his sword. A faint rainbow glow emanated from Sword Eater, his enchanted blade. Seeing the guildmaster unsheath his weapon made the adventurers around him follow suit.

Gaius looked at the glimmering blade in Wyatt’s hand, then looked back into the guildmaster’s eyes. “I’ll ask once more: will you turn back now?”

“I will not!”

It was clear now that there would be no more negotiations.

“That’s disappointing. In many ways.”

“I’m the one who should be disappointed here, Gaius Beldarus.”

Wyatt spat out his name as though he’d tasted something foul.

At the same time, the two men took deep breaths, and shouted—
“Attack!”

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When Wyatt realized they’d both given the same command, he spun around just in time to see kobolds appearing from between the trees and out of shrubs holding drawn bows.

“Aim for the sorcerers!” Gaius shouted. The kobolds aimed for those holding staves, as well as those wearing only light leather gear and holding no visible weapons.

“Take cover behind those with shields! Quickly!” Wyatt shouted, but the order came too late; the arrows were already loosed. Though the kobolds’ arrows were smaller than what a bow used by a human would shoot, they were effective enough against the lightly armored targets. The five sorcerers caught in the flurry of arrows fell to the ground, writhing in pain. They would most likely not succumb to their wounds, but they were out of the fight for now.

More importantly, this first attack was all it took for the adventurers to lose whatever shred of unity they’d had:

“Damn it all! They got me in the arm!”

“Hey, back off! This shield isn’t big enough to cover both of us!”

“Shoot back at them, already! What’re you just standing around for?!”

“They’re dodging in and out of the trees! I can’t get a good shot!”

Considering the adventurers usually operated alone, it made sense. If anything, they had always been more like rivals, competing for the best quests. Seeing this shameful display, Wyatt growled in frustration before shouting out his next orders.

“Don’t just stand around waiting for the next volley—get in there and attack before they shoot again!”

When a melee fighter faced archers, one’s options were to either close the distance, find cover, or get out of range. The dried riverbed was practically a shooting range; they had nothing to hide behind so long as the trees on either side were full of kobolds. Nor could they launch a ranged counterattack of their own.

If they closed the distance, the enemies’ arrows would no longer be effective. In their panic, the adventures had forgotten this obvious fact, but at their guildmaster’s orders they regained their senses. They drew their weapons and faced the trees, no longer fearful of the kobold archers.

“Run!” Gaius shouted. From both sides of the dried riverbed, the trees and bushes rustled with the sound of many kobolds dropping their bows and taking off.

“Don’t let them escape!” one of the adventures hollered. “All you gotta do is catch ’em and they’re good as dead!” In the next moment, nearly half of the adventurers had scattered, running into the trees after the kobolds.

They’re splitting up?! Wyatt took off after them, to order them to regroup before they ran out of earshot—but after a few steps forward, he froze in realization. This was Gaius’s plan. He wanted to lure them into the trees, to divide them. No doubt he *had* come armed, his signature faussar stashed away nearby. That heavy, enormous sword that looked like an oversized machete. A split second later, his suspicions were confirmed, as Gaius stepped out from the woods, sword in hand.

Wyatt knew that if he’d gone into the forest after the kobolds, that blade would have cut him in half.

★

If one were to liken it to other swords commonly found in the southern kingdoms, Wyatt’s Sword Eater was most akin to a bastard sword; the blade was longer and slightly thicker than that of a common longsword, but one could still wield it one-handed. In recent years, two-handed longswords had become one of the more common bladed weapons, but the more versatile bastard swords boasted a wider variety of offensive options.

On the downside, the thick blade made it heavier than most one-

handed swords; this, combined with the different center of gravity compared to a longsword, meant that one had to train specifically with a bastard sword to make good use of it.

Wyatt had learned the ins and outs of his weapon, and it was with that knowledge that he took up the “rage stance,” his sword resting on one shoulder as he gripped the handle with both hands. Unlike less skilled swordsmen, he knew that the posture was not just for brute-force offense. If anyone dared to attack him, he could parry the blow and keep his attacker occupied long enough for the others to surround them.

Wyatt had unwavering confidence in his skill, his experience, and his feats in battle. Even so—no, it was precisely *because* he felt confident that he knew not to underestimate Gaius Beldarus.

“Forget about the dogs! Kill this man first!”

At Wyatt’s orders, the remaining adventurers drew their swords and spears before surrounding Gaius. Those with bows knew they risked hitting their allies if they fired now; instead, they stood behind Wyatt with arrows at the ready.

Gaius did not make a move to defend or attack, standing almost perfectly still. He closed one eye and swept his other eye over the people before him. He nodded once, then roared, “*Daaarke!*”

The trees behind Wyatt rustled, and a split second later a woman in a brimmed cap and a black mantle leapt out. She tipped her cap to Wyatt and the adventurers, a silly grin on her face.

“Hello hello, one and all! So very sorry to intrude—I see you’re busy. I won’t need but a moment of your time.”

The woman exuded a strangely insouciant yet sensual aura as she sauntered over to the archers, her right hand behind her back and under her cloak. The adventurers stared, dumbstruck, until Wyatt yelled. “Get away from her!”

But it was too late. Though her gait had been relaxed and ambling, she’d somehow already managed to close a fair bit of distance. She removed her arm from her cloak to reveal a dagger in her hand. In a sudden contrast to her earlier movement she dashed toward the archers, slipped behind the one closest to her, and slit his throat all in one swift motion.

Even before he hit the ground, she was already halfway to her next target. The archer screamed as he saw her approaching; one bow-wielding adventurer beside him knocked her own arrow while another threw his bow aside and drew the sword that he wore on his hip.

Wyatt hesitated. That was long enough for Gaius to begin his own attack, and Wyatt knew that even ten adventurers stood little chance against the Black Rose of Igris.

Gaius swung his massive blade to the right, and cleaved through

one swordsman in a single stroke without even turning to face him. With another flick of his sword, he cut the spearhead from an adventurer's lance before delivering a solid kick to the man's stomach that sent him flying. The adventurer collided with a tree headfirst, his neck bent at a grotesque angle. Another stepped forward in an attempt to attack Gaius from behind, but before he could even draw his blade his head went flying.

Wyatt knew he was the only one who stood a chance. "I'll take Beldarus—three of you, go out and round up the others! The rest of you, get that woman!" The remaining adventurers surrounding Gaius quite literally leapt at the opportunity to get away from him. As ordered, three people raced off into the woods, and the rest rushed at the woman in the black mantle.

"It's so nice to meet you all! My name is Darke, and to be perfectly honest, Sir Gaius and I are lov—oh, that was a close one!" Her unprompted confession was cut short by an incoming lance thrust, which she jumped back to avoid. Darke skipped off into the woods, and the adventurers ran after her.

The sorcerers who had been hit by the kobolds' initial volley of arrows still lay on the ground, but as far as Wyatt was concerned the only people in that dried riverbed were himself and Gaius Beldarus.

Gaius had been watching the situation unfold behind Wyatt, but now turned back to meet the knight's gaze. Furrowing his brows, Gaius appeared to be in deep thought, and after a moment he took his own stance. He held his blade directly in front of himself, the point angled upward, in what was known as the "receiving stance," one of the most defensive postures.

I never thought I'd see this... The Black Rose of Igris, preparing to cross swords with me, one-on-one...!

The man hadn't flinched even when he was outnumbered ten to one. He'd survived the hell of the Five-Year War. And now, that very same man was not only deigning to face him—he was on the defensive. He was acknowledging Wyatt as a threat.

Wyatt was so moved, he felt as though he could cry. Even though most of his admiration had turned to hatred, it was still an honor to be treated as an equal by a warrior like this—the greatest compliment he'd ever received in his life.

This wasn't the time to get sentimental. Wyatt shook his head to clear his thoughts before raising his sword overhead, taking the roof stance. He charged forward and began his attack with a powerful downward slash angled diagonally. He wanted to avoid having to go on the defensive as much as possible. His Sword Eater was made of sturdy mythrill ore augmented by a strengthening sigil, so it would likely survive the brunt of Gaius's strength; whether Wyatt could

continue to hold on to his sword in the face of Gaius's assaults was another matter.

Gaius angled his sword to deflect the blow. Sparks flew as the two blades clashed and scraped against one another. Gaius broke away by wrenching his sword upward before quickly pointing the double-edged tip of his sword forward and thrusting.

Instead of parrying, Wyatt attempted a counterattack of his own, locking them in another bind. However, Gaius's faussar had a much wider, flatter blade, and with a twist of his wrist, he broke the lock, his sword now under Wyatt's. For a split second, the cutting edge of that broad sword was aimed squarely at Wyatt's ribs—

The knight realized his mistake just in time to leap backward. *Too close...! I can't rely on the usual techniques against that oversized meat cleaver!*

All this time, he'd thought the Black Rose of Igris had earned his reputation through sheer strength and his massive size. After their brief clash, though, he knew that impression was wrong. Gaius Beldarus had skill to match that strength—and that was what made him a monster.

★

They must have exchanged over thirty blows. Wyatt's armor was damaged in several places, and he'd suffered more than a few injuries. Blood poured from a cut on his cheek, and his breath was ragged and labored. Gaius, on the other hand, stood tall, as calm as ever. There wasn't a single scratch on him.

Wyatt was only just barely able to keep pace. He'd gotten close to landing a blow a few times, so close, but he could never reach Gaius. There was one technique he hadn't yet tried—but should he use it now? How much longer should he try to hold out? No, if he waited any longer, he would die before an opportunity presented itself.

How can anyone be that strong?! Every time I strike or block, it feels like he could rip my arms off!

"You... You're so skilled...!" Wyatt's words started out halted and strangled, but before long, he was screaming. "Your name is known far and wide for what you've accomplished on the battlefield! You became a *baron*! You were nobility!"

"Hm?" Gaius looked confused, but nothing in the man's posture changed.

"How could you forsake all of that?! All that a warrior aspires to be?! All that those of us who live by the sword could ever dream of?! All that glory, in exchange for what?! Pretending to be a farmer or a lumberjack out here?! In the middle of nowhere?! And when you *do* take up your sword again, it's to protect some *kobolds*?! You're even

willing to accept the fate of a criminal for them?! For a pack of lowly, worthless monsters?!”

Gaius listened calmly, and when his answer came, it was delivered as though he was saying the most natural thing in the world.

“Of course. I made a promise to a friend.”

“A *‘friend’*...Don’t tell me you mean one of those dogs...?”

“I do. Is there something wrong with that?”

Wyatt’s face twitched, and he exploded.

“*Everything’s wrong!* You’re the hero of the Five-Year War! Even if you don’t care about ranks or titles, you’re still a hero—heroes have *responsibilities* to uphold! A duty to those following in your footsteps! And what you’ve done—spitting on everything we live and die for—it’s an insult! An insult to everyone who strives for what you had! No, it’s sacrilege! You’ve desecrated that honor, those riches, that rank! All the while, we’ve been striving, clawing, fighting to reach such heights! We’ve dirtied our hands—no, we had no *choice* but to dirty our hands just for the chance at such glory! And you’ve cursed us! Denied our very existence! That’s it! You can’t get away with this!”

Wyatt himself hardly knew what he was saying—the words poured out of him through no will of his own. But it was precisely because the words came so readily that he knew they were true: this was the true form of that black sludge that had overtaken his heart.

Gaius, on the other hand, merely tilted his head, brows furrowed.

“I apologize. I don’t quite understand—this is all a little too complicated for me...”

He tightened the grip on his faussar before continuing.

“...but my dear friend entrusted me with something, and I’ve dedicated my life to protecting it. Isn’t that reason enough?”

The words burned Wyatt’s heart like a blazing fire.

“I’ll kill you...I’m going to *kill you*, Gaius Beldarus!”

“I can’t allow that, Sir Wyatt.”

The next clash would decide everything. The air between them grew even more charged. Both sides were prepared to kill.

But it was neither Gaius nor Wyatt who broke the tension—instead, a kobold burst through the brush. Breathless and frantic, the kobold ran up to Gaius, shouting:

“It’s awful...! They’re... They’re heading for the village!”

★

Kobolds were fast, but were not suited to running long distances. Under these dire circumstances, however, the kobolds that had joined Gaius had pushed themselves to run as fast as they could until they reached the village; no sooner did they arrive in the village plaza than they collapsed, gasping desperately for breath.

“There are...about ten humans...on their way...to the village...!” one kobold struggled to announce to Sashalia and the village elder.

Sashalia turned to the elder and grabbed him by the shoulders. “Please, take the others and hide in the forest!”

“And what do you plan on doing?”

“I’ll buy you all some time. Sir Gaius will be here soon.”

“Don’t be a fool!” he cried. “There are too many of them! That great big oaf might be able to handle himself, but they’ll kill you!”

Sashalia drew herself up to her full height—which was only a little taller than the elder. “I’ll have you know that I was a knight, thank you very much. I even graduated with the second highest honors in my class. I’m more than capable of holding them off long enough for you all to hide.”

She was only bluffing. Sashalia knew full well that her high marks had been purely academic, and that her greatest weakness was her lack of combat prowess. Even with the training she’d recently undergone, the half-elf still only had the physical strength of a twelve-year-old human.

“The forest is still dangerous, of course, but it’s still better than staying here. Please, elder, your people need you right now.”

“...All right, already,” he grumbled in response. “Don’t go getting yourself killed, young lady.”

“Don’t worry! I was the best of Sir Gaius’s aides!”

The elder saw clear through her facade, but merely patted one of the hands she’d rested on his shoulders. Sashalia smiled warmly back at him.

I sound like an idiot. “His best aide”? That won’t do me any good in a fight, and he knows it.

Even though they had superior numbers, the adventurers were so divided they could not take advantage of this. On top of that, those ten adventurers had split into two even smaller groups. Naturally, Sashalia and the kobolds that had returned to the village had no way of knowing this, and unfortunately what should have been an advantage now worked against them.

But, most of all, Sashalia blamed herself for being unable to offer Gaius an alternate strategy. If she had, maybe they would have been able to mount a counterattack—or so she told herself.

“Hey, ye got me too!” Emon appeared between the two of them, clapping a hand on each of their shoulders.

Sashalia sighed. “Don’t go getting all confident just because you managed to beat me once.”

“Ah, I’ll be better’n ye in no time! Ye’d need to be a lot bigger and a lot bustier to stop me!”

“Excuse you?! Don’t make me knock your lights out again!”

Sashalia drove a fist into Emon's stomach, making him double over.

"Crivvens! Ye're like my sister...ye both got wicked tempers..."

The village elder shook his head as he walked away. "You started it, boy."

And with that, Sashalia and Emon—still hunched over on the ground—were left to hold off the invading humans.

★

Eight adventurers reached the village. One walked ahead of the rest—he appeared to be the leader. His massive frame was clad in metal armor, and he gripped a heavy-looking mace in one large hand.

Trailing just behind him was another man wearing lighter gear. He pointed ahead of the leader and seemed to be explaining something to him, as though leading the group to their destination, despite the fact that he could not seem to keep ahead of the larger man's impatient stride. He somewhat resembled a hunter.

Sashalia watched their approach from under the cover of one of the kobolds' pit-like homes. In the next home over, Emon lay in wait as well. She flashed him a hand sign telling him to wait then turned to the forest to her left. The kobolds had fled in that direction, but she could still see a few of the children and older villagers trailing behind.

I've got to make sure those adventurers don't follow them, no matter what... Sashalia took a deep, shaky breath, trying to steady her nerves.

The adventurers had drawn close enough by now that their conversation was audible. She could hear one knightly adventurer clad in chainmail say to their leader, "It looks like they've evacuated, Hubert."

"Damn it...and I was gonna tell Wyatt we got attacked by the mutts when we got here. If we don't kill a few, my cover story won't fly." The man called Hubert scratched his neck, visibly irritated. He then turned to the man who looked like a hunter and said, "Hey, Cyril. You know your way around the forest. Take two of these guys and go find us some dogs to kill. The rest of you, search this place for some magic beast parts—claws, fangs, any stuff we can sell. But if you see something that looks like a liver, be sure you take it. Could be from a bugbear."

Cyril nodded. With two others following behind him, he set off in the direction the kobolds had fled.

Sashalia bit her lip. *That man knows how to navigate the Greatwood...this is bad. He's going to find the others!* She had planned to stall the invaders in the village until Gaius returned, picking off as many as she could with sneak attacks, but she couldn't afford to lie in wait a second longer. She sent Emon another signal, then drew her sword. She gripped the hilt tightly as she prepared herself to go on the

offensive.

During her time in the Knights of the Chain, she'd often been teased for not letting out a loud battle cry during practice like so many of her peers did. They'd said it made her seem even less intimidating than she already appeared. But Sashalia understood now, as she slipped out from her hiding place, that she had never been meant to charge headlong into battle. *This* was what she was best suited to.

The three adventurers walked side by side. Sashalia crept up behind Cyril, preparing to strike. When she had closed the distance between them, she held her sword with both hands, bringing it so far behind her that it touched her back. Even if she only managed to take down their guide, that would at least increase the odds that the villagers would be able to escape.

Sashalia was moments away from swinging her sword down with all her might...but luck was not on her side. By sheer coincidence, Cyril looked over his shoulder a second before her blow came down. Their eyes met as she swung her blade, and the strike that was meant for his neck only managed to lop off half of his ear.

Cyril roared in pain and confusion, but his instincts kicked in; he tumbled to the ground, but rolled away from his assailant. His companions took up their weapons—a war hammer and a curved sword called a falchion, respectively.

“*Uwoooooaaah—!*” Emon, who had followed Sashalia, let out a battle cry as he lashed out with his sword, aiming for the man with the hammer. His strike was parried with ease by the man wielding the falchion.

Both Sashalia and Emon had completely failed in landing their surprise attack.

At the sound of Cyril's cry, Hubert and the others had come running. Suddenly, the half-elf and dwarf found themselves in a two-against-eight situation.

“Oi oi oi, these aren't dogs. What's the meaning of this, Cyril?” Hubert's eyes narrowed at the man clutching his bleeding ear.

“Damn it...! I-I don't know! I haven't seen them before—this is the dogs' village, I promise!” His voice cracked as he trembled beneath Hubert's stare.

“I don't believe you. You *did* know there were others here. But I'll get the truth out of you later. For now...” Hubert turned back to Sashalia, a vulgar leer on his face. “...I'm gonna enjoy this pleasant surprise. Here I was thinking this job would be boring, but what do you know—we found ourselves a girl here...”

The look in his eye sent a chill down Sashalia's spine. She took two steps back, holding her sword up between them.

“But look at her, sir, she’s still flat as a board,” the man with the hammer snickered. Unlike Sashalia, he seemed to believe his leader was only joking.

“Shut it, you idiot. That’s just how I like ’em: just when they stop looking like little boys. This puny little elf’s the perfect size, too.”

“You sound like you’ve done this before, Hubert!”

“Only four times!” He cackled hideously. The other adventurers looked at him, half in awe and half in disbelief.

“Leave the elf to me,” Hubert said. “You and you, kill that ugly brat over there. Cyril and you two, get back out there and find us some dogs. The rest of you, stick to the original plan: find us some valuables in those hovels.”

“Um, but...” Cyril replied hesitantly, “My ear... Can I at least treat it first?”

“That’s not gonna kill you, is it?!” Hubert spat. “We don’t have time for that. Go! And when you get back, you and me are gonna have a chat about this secret you were keeping from me.”

Cyril looked like the last thing he wanted to do was agree with the larger man, but he nodded and struggled to his feet. Each of the adventurers set off for their respective assignments. Emon prepared himself to square off against his two opponents, and Hubert stepped closer to Sashalia, blocking her view of her friend.

“Now then, little lady, let’s have us some fun. Not that I expect it’ll be very fun for you...”

Sashalia’s sword was small, suited for her petite frame. Against such a huge, armored opponent wielding a heavy weapon like a mace, it stood little chance of winning. Instead, Sashalia focused all her attention on evasion, struggling with all her might to dodge his swings. As though corralling a wayward sheep with a stick, Hubert slowly but surely closed off each avenue of escape until he had her backed up against one of the kobold houses. Sashalia felt the wall against her back and knew she’d been completely cornered.

“Don’t play so hard to get!” Hubert jeered.

“You’re sick! I’m not just going to give up and let you do what you want with me!”

“Ho ho, so you *do* know what I’m gonna do to you.”

Sashalia saw his gloating as an opening to strike. She pointed the tip of her sword beneath his breastplate and thrust—but with a light swing of his mace, Hubert easily brushed her blade aside and the tip of her sword screeched against his armor.

The force of his swing knocked the sword from her hands, and it disappeared into the grass. She realized then that he hadn’t been recklessly taunting her; he was still on guard, anticipating her resistance.

Hubert drove the metal-plated tip of his boot into Sashalia's stomach, kicking her down. She tasted bitter bile as she crashed to the ground. Hubert straddled her, and slapped her hard across the cheek once, twice, three times, four times. Five, six, seven times. He then raised his fist and brought it down into her face three times. His hand was soon painted with red.

Sashalia lay perfectly still. Hubert grabbed one of her pointed ears and drew a dagger from his waistband with his other hand. He brought the knife up under her earlobe and sliced away the lower half of her ear.

"I don't really owe him anything, but let's call that payback for what you did to Cyril." He flicked the bit of flesh aside. With a sudden burst of energy, Sashalia lifted herself onto her elbows, and with as much force as she could muster, brought her left knee up to strike him between the legs. She was still determined to fight back, even without a weapon.

Unfortunately, Hubert seemed prepared for this, as well. He clamped his thighs down on her leg as she kicked at him, stopping it in its tracks with a disgustingly smug sneer.

"Hah! Girls always resort to that one. Man, I can't even remember how many times I've seen that move by now. Looks like I'll need to punish this naughty leg of yours."

Hubert reached back to his waistband, rummaging around in a hip pouch before withdrawing a vial filled with green liquid. "Ever heard of a 'sea snake'? They're this magic beast that lives in the southern ocean."

"Their venom is...used as an...anesthetic..."

"Smart kid. That's right. It's used as a painkiller, too. Only problem is that it works a little too well. Know what happens when you apply it?"

"It causes...permanent...nerve damage..."

"Very good! It doesn't just kill the pain—it kills your nerves, too! That's why doctors don't use it anymore."

Hubert slowly lowered his dagger to Sashalia's left leg. He stabbed her in the calf and dragged the blade upward, making her twist and groan in pain. She struggled to get away, but could not wrest herself free.

"And now for the venom..." Hubert tipped the vial, pouring the green liquid into the cut he'd made. It burned as soon as the venom made contact with her flesh, but soon the pain dulled into a warmth that spread up to her knee and down to her ankle.

Hubert looked up from his handiwork to face Sashalia. "Now, for the next leggggh!" He was met with a nasty surprise; Sashalia lifted herself up once again, this time to headbutt him squarely in the face.

Even after the way she'd been beaten and pinned down, all of Hubert's torture had not taken away her will to fight back.

The headbutt had caused Hubert to bite down hard on his tongue. He fell backward and rolled around with his hands to his face, making muffled screams of pain. Sashalia saw the chance she'd been waiting for and made her escape—or at least, she tried to. Her left leg wouldn't move, and she couldn't feel anything at all below her mid-thigh.

However, this didn't stop her from trying; she rolled over and scrabbled at the grass, trying her best to crawl away on her hands and her one good knee. Hubert roared behind her.

"You goddamn little thit! That'th it! I'b gonna gut you like a pig!"

Sashalia continued to desperately crawl away as Hubert rose to his feet. He slowly stomped over to her, deciding what part of her he was going to break next. *This time, there will be no escape*—both Sashalia and Hubert had the exact same thought. His shadow crept over her...

With her face down near the ground, Sashalia was unable to see what happened at that moment, but she felt the wind as *something* leapt over her to land between her and Hubert. Sashalia struggled to open her swollen eyelids as wide as she could as she struggled to turn over and look behind her. When she saw what—who—it was, her eyes burned, and tears flowed down her bloodied face.

By struggling with all her might, Sashalia had bought herself the time she needed. Hubert's screams of pain were the signal she needed so that *he* could find her. Her refusal to give up, even when all seemed lost, ended up saving her.

And in one brief moment, it was over. Hubert's hands were severed from his arms, still holding onto his mace, followed immediately by his torso tumbling away from his legs. Both cuts had been made quite literally in the blink of an eye.

Hubert let out a strangled, bizarre scream even as his upper body fell to the ground, an expression of blank shock etched on his face.

"*Miss Sashalia!*" Gaius yelled, dropping to his knees beside her. Sashalia knew she'd never forget the sight of him running to her, calling her name like that—not for as long as she lived.

There was so, so much she wanted to tell him. She wanted to cling to him and never let go. But she pushed all of that down, and instead cried, "I'm okay, sir...! Emon needs you! The villagers fled into the woods, but they're being pursued! Please, they all need your help more than me!"

For just a brief moment, Gaius wavered. But he nodded to her, stifling his own urge to cry. He stood and took off running at blazing speed.

Sashalia listened to his footfalls for as long as she could before collapsing back into the grass. Her body and spirit had both reached their limits. Her vision and her consciousness faded to black as her eyes closed. Sashalia sank into a deep, deep darkness.

★

Gaius had saved the kobolds that fled the village, restraining the two adventurers that pursued them. Only Cyril had managed to escape. After returning to the dried riverbed, he found ten dead adventurers...and six fallen kobolds. Although their plan to ambush the humans had been successful, their tactics could only go so far towards making up for the huge disadvantage that kobolds faced against humans. It appeared that some had failed to outrun their pursuers, while others had been forced into combat. They'd successfully defended the village from the Ryburgh Adventurers' Guild, but not without losses.

Chapter 7: Crown of Grass

The star send-off ceremony for the kobolds who died was conducted early the next morning. Ever since then, Emon had remained out on the outskirts of town, practicing his sword swings.

“I was wondering where you’d run off to!” Darke called out to him as she walked up to him from behind. “How are you feeling? Have all your wounds healed?”

“M’fine,” Emon mumbled, neither turning to face her nor stopping his practice. “Compared to Sashalia, I had it easy... How’s she doin’, anyhow?”

“Still not awake yet, I’m afraid. We’ve tried all we could, but even after enlisting the aid of the spirits...”

Darke exhaled sharply before continuing.

“...she’ll never walk unaided again. She’ll need a cane or some manner of support for the rest of her life.”

Emon froze in mid-swing when he heard that. His head drooped slightly and he clenched his jaw. Even with his back turned to her, Darke could see the tension in his body.

Emon struggled to contain his immense frustration at his own helplessness. For the third time, he’d failed to save the people around him. He couldn’t help Gaius defend that small settlement from McArdle and the bandits. The adventurers took him down easily before he could save Fog, Fluff, and Fishbone. And now Sashalia...once again, he had been of no help whatsoever.

Ever since Fog’s death, Emon had trained relentlessly; he’d never once complained about his regimen after that. Gaius’s guidance combined with his natural dwarven strength to produce good results, considering how long he’d been training. But even so, he’d still fallen to the two adventurers that Hubert sent after him. All his effort could not compensate for the harsh unpredictability of a real combat situation. Instead of saving the day, it was all he could do to stay alive until Gaius arrived.

Dwarves were abnormally strong—perhaps the physically strongest intelligent race on the continent. They were even more durable and powerful than orcs, ogres, and other races that were notoriously suited for combat. When Emon left home, he’d believed that this would be enough to see him through during his travels through the outside world. He’d foolishly thought he’d simply grow

even more powerful by walking the path of a hero king.

His foolhardy bravado hadn't been dampened after the highway bandits outside Ryburgh had assaulted him. Even after McArdle's men had caved his head in, his spirits bounced back even before his skull had—because in both incidents, he was the only one who had been hurt.

But he'd failed to save Fog, the mother of his dear little friend. Now, yet another of his friends had suffered because of his incompetence, with wounds that would last her the rest of her life.

The brash overconfidence so commonly found in young men, that belief that nothing could ever faze him—all that had vanished.

“Damn it all!” Emon screamed, slashing wildly at the air with all his might.

“...It's almost time for breakfast,” Darke said calmly. “You should have something to eat.”

“I know...”

“You can't gain all the strength you're looking for in a day's worth of practice.”

“I know that!”

Darke's shoulders flinched.

“I just...I just wanna be helpful, too...”

Pretending not to hear him, Darke turned on her heel and walked back toward the village. As she left Emon standing there, she murmured her reply.

“...Boys always do.”

★

In the building being used as a makeshift infirmary, Sashalia's eyes finally opened that morning, and Gaius was sitting beside her to see it happen.

“Miss Sashalia!”

“Sir Gaius...? I...” Gingerly, she brought a hand to her forehead, then her cheek. Her face was plastered in poultices from medicinal herbs. As soon as she felt them, memories of the fight came flooding back to her. She twisted to the side and willed her left leg to bend in an attempt to stand, only to find that she was unable to feel anything from the middle of her thigh down. When her memories caught up with her physical state, Sashalia let out a quiet “...Ah.”

Gaius had been watching her face intently, but now he cast his gaze downward. He hesitated for a moment then brought a hand to her back and helped her sit up in her bed.

“Miss Sashalia...I don't know what to say. This is all my fault. All that happened to you was because of my poor planning. I'm...so very sorry.” He knelt beside her, his pained expression disappearing as he

brought his forehead down to the floor.

“N-No, you don’t have to do that, Captain! C—...Sir Gaius, this wasn’t your fault. I mean that.”

“It is. I should have been able to prevent this. I should have bolstered the village’s defenses more—at the very least, I should have made Darke stay behind to protect you all.”

Those words stabbed at Sashalia’s heart like a knife. Of course, she knew Gaius had no intention of putting her down, but they only fueled the fire of her inferiority complex. It was as though he’d said to her, “Darke can take care of herself, but you can’t”—words that were already wound around her heart like thorny vines. To make matters worse, he felt the need to apologize for her inability to protect herself. That only further drove home the fact that she’d failed on every front—as a warrior and as a counselor.

One after another, tears trickled down Sashalia’s face. “Ah, this isn’t...I’m not...” She fought to put a smile on her face, trying desperately to maintain a brave front, but she couldn’t stop the hot tears from falling.

“I apologize...” Gaius said again.

“Please don’t.”

If you do, I’ll only feel even more pathetic than I already do.

“Sir Gaius,” Sashalia continued, before he could reply. “I’d like to be alone for a little while.”

For a moment, he looked back at her, hesitant to leave things as they were. But eventually he nodded.

“...I’ll come back later.” With that, he stood up and made for the door. Sashalia couldn’t bring herself to reply, or to even watch him leave.

I’m so stupid. All that about being Sir Gaius’s best aide, and being able to hold off those adventurers...now look at me. I’ll be even more of a burden than I was before. And to make matters worse, I just made a fool of myself in front of him. I wish I were dead.

But Sashalia knew she couldn’t let herself die just yet. Not until she found a way to repay the man who had given her hope when all seemed lost. She doubted Gaius even realized what he’d done for her. That clumsy smile, those huge hands—just the thought of them filled her with hope.

All these years, Sashalia had longed for the chance to not only repay him, but to become the kind of person who could stand beside him as an equal. Maybe, just maybe, then she would be able to...

“I chased him all the way here, but in the end I only ended up dragging him down...” Sashalia mumbled to herself, her shoulders hunched and trembling. She curled up as best she could by bringing her working right knee up to her chest, pressing her face against it to

stifle her racking sobs.

★

At the same time, in a different part of the village, Darke had just finished interrogating the two adventurers Gaius had captured. She sat just outside the home where they were being kept imprisoned, thinking over the information she'd gotten out of them. Something just didn't sit right with her. They'd contradicted each other a few times, but after a couple rounds of thorough individual interrogation, they'd eventually begun to tell her a coherent story that made sense.

Still, she found it difficult to shake her doubt. Perhaps she was overthinking it all. There was no guarantee that the other adventurers were mounting a counterattack. But, in any case, Darke knew she had to tell Gaius and the others. She stood and made her way to Fog's house to deliver the news:

The Ryburgh Adventurers' Guild had roughly four hundred active members. Should Wyatt choose to send out a guild order, it was estimated that he could mobilize as many as three hundred adventurers.

★

A few days after the "expedition," the band of adventurers returned to Ryburgh, completely exhausted. Normally, most of them would rush to the guild to collect their reward, which they would then proceed to burn through in hedonistic pursuits. This time, though, all any of them wanted to do was collapse into their beds.

Wyatt was the only one that did not appear to be suffering from the journey. His tenacity in both mind and spirit never failed to amaze the guild members.

Upon returning to the guild headquarters, Wyatt had Cyril apprehended and sent to the hold where they kept prisoners. He would deal with Cyril later for hiding what he'd known about the kobold village. After that, he quickly took care of doling out rewards to the expedition's participants and then withdrew to his office.

Wyatt began unfastening his armor with one hand as he used the other to remove the sword that hung at his waist and set it down on his desk. He sank into his chair, letting out a heavy sigh and deep frown he'd been holding in the entire way home.

He threw a nasty glare over at his bookshelf. When he spotted the book he'd been looking for, resting in its special spot on the shelf, he growled. He stood up and stalked over to it, yanking the book out.

"Iron Knight Iwanoshin." Wyatt had carried this book with him for most of his life. The sight of the cover made so many memories

come rushing back. All of them made him sick now.

“*Graaaahhh!*” With a roar, Wyatt grabbed the book by both covers and pulled it apart down the spine. Again and again, he ripped out fistfuls of pages and tore them to pieces, then picked up the pieces and shredded those as well. Panting and shouting, he stomped the scraps of paper, then dropped to his hands and knees, pounding the scraps on the floor with his fists.

His eyes were bloodshot and his breath came in growling, ragged pants. Wyatt suspected the guild members below could hear him, but he didn’t care. He needed to vent his rage. No, he needed to *act* like he was venting. If he didn’t go through the motions, he suspected that terrible, burning emotion would reignite in his heart and threaten to burn him up once again.

“Back then... Back then...!”

When Wyatt and Gaius had been interrupted during their duel, Gaius had run away to aid the village and Wyatt had attempted to follow him. But, between the need to regroup his men and tend to his wounded, Wyatt had been forced to put a stop to his pursuit before long.

“If there weren’t so many damned nuisances, I’d have...”

...*Assuredly lost that fight.* Not even Wyatt could deny it. He’d felt it as soon as they had crossed swords. But despite that—or perhaps because of it—Wyatt’s fury was still agonizing.

Deep breaths. Breathe in...and breathe out. Then take another deep breath. Wyatt forced himself to calm down.

“All right... That’s enough of that, Wyatt.” He punched himself in the shoulder again and again, willing his anger to die down until he was as calm as he’d pretended to be in front of the others.

Wyatt reminded himself of his original goal: sparking an armed conflict between the two factions of House Zigan. He’d lost twenty of his soldiers that should have gone toward furthering that cause.

He’d been soundly defeated by Gaius. His side had suffered much heavier casualties against an enemy that should have posed no problem. Worse, once word of all this reached Keighley, it was sure to impact her opinion of him.

This was a failure. A massive failure.

Even so, it was only a single failure. He still had another four hundred people at his disposal—twenty deaths was nothing in the long run. Losing to a backwards, primitive pack of monsters was sure to earn him some scorn and contempt—but that was nothing. It did not mean Wyatt was ruined.

It would take more than this to undo everything Wyatt had worked so hard to build. If he simply forgot all about Gaius Beldarus—if he could prevent himself from seeking revenge—then he could

recover from this. He could move forward.

The last deep breath he'd forced himself to take now burst from his lips. He could feel the burning in his chest ebb away, little by little.

Get it together. Don't let yourself get bogged down by petty grudges. I admit it, I lost. He had me beaten, completely. Another second and he'd have beheaded me. So what?

The flames in his heart continued: Are you sure you're okay with that? Can you live with me gnawing away at you? Revenge is what you really want, isn't it?

But Wyatt buried the thoughts under his reasoning and closed the lid tight over the fire—just in time for a knock to sound at the door, followed by the voice of one of his employees.

"Excuse me, sir! S-Sorry to bother you! I have an urgent message for you." He could hear the fear in her voice.

"Come in."

She opened the door, but she wasn't alone. Beside her stood—

"McArdle?!"

The man leaned heavily against the clerk, a splint wrapped tightly around one leg. With great difficulty, she helped him over to a nearby sofa.

"I beg your pardon...Sir Wyatt..."

"I was wondering what took you so long to return... What on earth happened to you?!"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, sir, but...in the middle of our mission to pillage that settlement in Dugard's name...we were attacked. I managed to escape, but fell off my horse and was unable to get back up. I was finally found by a hunter, who rescued me, but I didn't know what to tell him...I didn't want to expose your plan. I had to wait until I recovered before—"

Wyatt held up a hand to cut off his rambling apology. There was only one thing he wanted to know. "Who attacked you? There shouldn't have been any peacekeeping patrols out that way."

"I-It was the Black Rose of Igris, sir...Gaius Beldarus!"

Wyatt's eye twitched.

"There's no doubt about it, it was him!" McArdle continued, growing more agitated the longer he recalled that day. "He killed all my men! He saw everything! Our crimes, our fake crests, my face...please forgive me, sir!"

Wyatt knew this would happen eventually. Not only had he planned on leaving survivors to tell the tale, he knew that eventually someone would see through their plan to frame Dugard. But who would listen to the tall tales of one or two peasants?

However, *this* was a completely different story. The Black Rose of

Igris, the hero of the Five-Year War who had fought alongside nobility and royalty—now *he* knew of their plot. That would mean the end of everything. The monarchy would never legitimize Keighley's dominion over Northplain. Even if she were to completely crush Dugard, her territory would be confiscated and brought under the direct control of the king.

Wyatt was on the road to ruin. He had only one chance to salvage everything.

He clutched his face tightly with his right hand, his fingers digging into his flesh until they pressed against his skull. A strange, muffled sound managed to escape from his lips.

McArdle watched him in terrified confusion, shrinking back into the couch. He'd never seen the man like this before.

At last, Wyatt released his face and stared into his palm. From where McArdle sat, he couldn't yet see Wyatt's expression, but he could hear the guildmaster's voice.

"No need to apologize, McArdle. I'm not angry. Quite the opposite, in fact..."

Wyatt looked up at him, beaming with joy. At least, that was how it would appear to anyone who didn't know him.

"Thank you. Now I know what I need to do. Thank you so much."

The flames in Wyatt's heart had burst free of their confines and had overtaken him. He continued smiling widely, an ominous glint in his eye.

★

All of the six kobolds that died had families. Some were the heads of their household, while others left grieving parents behind. The dark, painful sorrow of their loss weighed heavily on the whole village.

Though it was a heavy burden to bear, everyone understood that they could not afford to let their despair crush them. They had to pick themselves up and fight, or else they wouldn't even be alive to mourn.

One of them had said that, but by now no one could remember who had originally come up with it. Rain Grass, perhaps? Or one of the young men? Maybe it was a member of the housewives' brigade. In any case, the quote was often heard around the village as of late, and everyone had the distinct feeling that *someone* had said it first.

What everyone did know was that they all shared the same idea. The image of what they needed to do, and what they wanted was starting to take the same form in everyone's hearts.

★

It had been raining heavily since daybreak and the weather showed no signs of letting up, which meant no one would be working outside anytime soon. Gaius sat beside the sunken fireplace in Fog's house, tending to his weapons.

The village children sat around him, watching his every move with rapt attention. Ever since that terrible day, they'd all stuck close to Fluff and Amber Blossom, doing their best to cheer their friends up. Naturally, Fluff was still heavily affected by the loss of his mother, but thanks to Fishbone and the others glimpses of his usual self would peek through a little more every day.

The most difficult parts came at night, when all his friends went home. As soon as the sun set and everyone left, he would cling to Darke's chest and refuse to let go. She and Sashalia did their best to tend to the void that Fog's death had left in his heart. At first, Gaius had tried to help them, only to be turned away by Darke. This was how he spent his free time instead.

"Ah, this won't last much longer..." he murmured.

"What's wrong, gramps?"

"This." Gaius held up his faussar, tilting the edge towards Emon. The children wanted to get in close and see as well, but Gaius would scold them if they ever tried to approach his weapons. They sat back at a safe distance and leaned in as far as they could to get a better look.

Emon whistled. "The blade's all cracked, innit! Bloody thing's about tae fall tae pieces."

"I only used this one for the first time in that last battle. It's only natural for a sword to wear down, but for it to happen so quickly..."

"It's cause you fight like a damned beast! I'm surprised you don't go through 'em quicker."

Gaius chuckled lightly. "I suppose you're right. It's time to retire this one, then. If I try fighting with it, it won't last more than a few blows. I'll go fetch another from my wagon—or maybe I'll use a different weapon next time..."

He gently set the faussar down beside him on the woven mat, using both hands. The children scooted backward to make sure they were still at the prescribed distance.

"Allow me to have a look at your sword as well, Emon." Gaius unsheathed the sword the dwarf handed him, examining it closely.

Emon had left home with a short, broad, double-edged sword his father had left him, a weapon resembling something between an anelace and a spatha. When Gaius first saw it, he'd imagined it was meant to be wielded with both hands, similar to a bastard sword, and he had been instructing the young man to practice with it as such.

He had asked whether the curious weapon was crafted for a

specific sort of dwarven fighting style that he was unfamiliar with, but Emon's father had died when the boy was only two years old, and so he knew no more about the sword than Gaius did. His older sister had locked away all the enchanted weapons and objects they'd inherited, so Emon had grown up assuming the sword was nothing special. Gaius, on the other hand, could tell right away that it had been well-loved by its previous owner.

"This part here could do with some sharpening..." said Gaius.

"Gee, thanks, gramps!"

"I'm not doing it for you! Sharpen your own sword!"

The children burst into giggles. Emon sulked for a brief moment, but seeing Fluff laugh along with his friends brought a smile to his face as well.

"Knock knock!" Rain Grass, Red Eye, and a group of kobold men opened the door and called out in greeting as they walked into the house. They'd huddled under a few large leaves to keep themselves dry, and they left the dripping leaves in a pile just outside the door.

"Still workin' hard even when we can't tend to the fields, eh Gaius?"

"Afternoon!"

"All right kids, we've got work to discuss," announced Red Eye. "Go on and play in the assembly hall."

"Okaaay," the children chimed in unison, running as fast as they could through the rain. Once they'd all left, the adults sat before Gaius.

"Sorry to barge in like this," Rain Grass said.

"It's no trouble at all," Gaius replied, waving a hand in front of his face. The kobolds looked to one another, unsure as to how they should begin. Eventually, Red Eye nodded to the others, then turned to Gaius hesitantly.

"...We have a favor to ask you."

★

Darke sat beside Sashalia's bed in the infirmary, listening to the downpour outside. "My, it certainly is coming down out there."

"Yeah..." Sashalia replied listlessly. Both were doing their best to avoid eye contact, staring at the door as they spoke. They'd been sitting like that for quite some time.

"You know..." Sashalia began, "I've been thinking about leaving the village."

"Is that truly what you want, Lady Denan?" Darke replied.

"I'm only going to get in the way here."

"The villagers are so grateful to you. As is Sir Gaius. No one thinks

of you as a burden.”

“But *I* do.”

“What will you do if you leave?”

“I don’t know...”

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know, okay?!” Sashalia shook her head, her shoulders trembling.

“In that case, permission denied. I simply cannot authorize such a reckless mission.”

“That’s not for you to decide...”

“No? As your elder, I think it is.”

“What are you talking about? We were in the same class.”

“Aha...I *may* have lied about my age in the academy. I’m actually three years older.”

“What?!” That got Sashalia to look her in the eye. The half-elf whipped around and looked at Darke in shock, so much so that she forgot to try and dry her tears or wipe her nose.

“Do be sure to keep it a secret, okay? I lied to Sir Gaius as well.”

“So...you’re twenty-six?”

“I suppose I am.”

“You’re nearly thirty?!”

“And just why are you rounding my age up like that?!” Darke raised her voice as well. The two stared each other down in silence, Darke glaring and Sashalia wide-eyed.

“...Pfft...”

“Aheh heh heh...”

The two couldn’t contain themselves anymore, bursting into light-hearted laughter until their stomachs hurt. A sudden question came to Sashalia’s mind, cutting her laughter short.

“...How *did* you end up in Sir Gaius’s care?”

“Hm? Well, it’s not a very exciting story...”

“I don’t mind. You already know everything about me. It wouldn’t be fair of you to keep it to yourself.” Sashalia twisted and shuffled on her elbows as she spoke, trying to turn to better face Darke. As she was doing so, her hand slipped out from under her and she fell face-first into Darke’s bosom.

“Oh, my... Do you need some affection, Lady Aide?” Darke held the half-elf to her chest, cradling her like a child.

“...I do sometimes.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that.” Darke gave a tiny nod as she held Sashalia close. Slowly, she began to tell her the story of her past.

They say that Goldchester, the earldom to the west of Northplain, used to be nothing but fields of golden wheat. One day, a nobleman ordered his army to build garrisons in the fields, only to be killed in an uprising by the infuriated peasantry. No one remembers whose army it was, but the region came to be named after those golden fields, the pride of its people—until the Five-Year War.

Goldchester was on the edge of the kingdom, sharing a border with the next kingdom over. In a previous war, half of its territory had been annexed by that kingdom. This kingdom had formed an alliance with several other nearby nations to continue expanding its territory, and together they invaded Goldchester yet again—that incursion was the start of the Five-Year War.

For the first three years, Igris suffered loss after loss against the forces of the invading kingdoms. By the fourth year, however, it had managed to turn the tide. Not only did Igris manage to push the enemy alliance back, it also made strides in reclaiming western Goldchester. By the fifth year, the enemies had been completely driven out of the region.

One young girl and her father had just happened to be in Goldchester at the time of Igris's counter-invasion to reclaim the land that had been annexed. Her father died in the battle, but she was not particularly sad to lose him. He had been a compulsive gambler, a thief, a drunk, and a con artist, one who bragged about once killing a man in a drunken brawl.

He'd dragged her to Goldchester as a tool, not as his child. He forced her to steal for him, and if he still needed more money to fund his vices, he would pay with his daughter's body instead. So when the young girl saw her father slain before her very eyes, she was relieved. It meant her suffering would finally be over—or so she believed.

Igris's soldiers were even worse. They dragged her to a nobleman's villa, where they housed other children they'd kidnapped from the areas around the battlefields. There, they were stripped of their names, and referred to only by the color of their hair—Reddish, Blonde, Ash, Grey, Brunette... Dark. When the children were all used up, or when the kidnappers simply grew tired of them, they were disposed of. Over time, the girl helped bury Reddish, Grey and two different Brunettes. If there was one benefit to her upbringing, it was that her father's harsh treatment had equipped her mentally to survive this hellish life. But the soldiers constantly brought in new captives; she suspected they would grow tired of her before long.

It was then that *he* arrived. It seemed that someone had been hunting for the soldiers who were in charge of securing new "merchandise." Though he bore the same crest as the other soldiers, he burst through the front doors of the villa and turned his sword on

the aristocrat's men, killing over half of them himself.

The sight of him was terrifying. His wicked face was drenched in blood, teeth bared like a wild animal as he hacked through them with a frightening fury. More disturbingly, there were tears streaming down his face even as he slaughtered them. He cried at the sight of those children, their haunted faces, and the corpses of the ones he'd failed to save.

He must be crying for me, too, thought the girl. She was amazed. No one had ever shed tears for her in her whole life. That show of compassion alone made her feel like the man was an angel come to save her.

It was decided that the children would be sent to an orphanage in the capital. The girl kicked, cried, and screamed as the knights tried to take her. She did not want to leave him. She latched onto his arm and did not let go even once, begging them to let her stay with him. Eventually, he relented, and promised her that he would not leave her.

★

"You can't be serious!"

Later that night, the girl awoke at the sound of an outburst in the next tent over. Under the darkness of the new moon, she crawled outside of her own tent and toward the neighboring one, to hear the rest of their conversation.

"Billy's right. Someone in your position, taking in a kid like that? Come on, now."

"But sir, I made a promise to her..."

She leaned in closer; inside, the scary man was discussing her situation with his senior knights and his commander.

"This isn't just about you," said one of them. "This is about all the people you represent. The commander and House Raftia of Lucastle defended you, and of course, there's His Majesty, the former queen and king..."

"That's right," one of the senior knights chimed in. "They all put their necks on the line to save you from that scumbag, Lord Bigberg. He wanted your head for what you did to his men."

Among those Gaius had slain was a relative of Earl Egbert Bigberg, the man who would go on to become the prime minister; Darke did not learn this until much later.

"Besides, you know what those kids were being made to do—think of how it would look if you took one in. That'll make everyone supporting you look bad, too. Do you want people saying you killed your allies *and* stole a little girl for your own? You know what, it doesn't matter if you mind it or not. Like we said, it's more than just

your reputation on the line. Try using your head instead of your sword for once!”

The commander’s lecture was followed by a long silence. Eventually, the girl heard the scary man’s reply.

“...So as long as it’s clear there’s no possibility of impropriety, I can take her in?”

“Have you been listening?! There’s no way it *won’t* look bad, you damn fool!”

The girl decided she had heard enough. She crawled back to her tent with a vague sense of guilt. As she pulled the covers over her head, she decided that tomorrow she would go to the man and take back what she’d said.

★

“What the *hell* did you do?!”

Once again, the young girl awoke to the sound of one of the senior knights screaming his head off. She rubbed her eyes at the brightness of the morning sun as she sat up, then poked her head out of the tent. Yet again, the scary man was being scolded.

“I went into town last night and had a seal of castration placed on me, sir! Don’t I look like a wise monk now? They have these placed on them all the time—did you know that?”

“You’re a real piece of work, always doing the craziest things without a second thought... And just look at this hack job! Who’d you ask to do that mark, a blind man?”

“He claimed to be a wandering sorcerer, but he didn’t say much else...”

The senior knight grabbed the scary man’s face with one hand, using the other to rub vigorously at his cheek.

“That hurts, sir...!”

“Damn, it’s really not coming off... How do you get rid of these things?”

Typically, curse marks faded with time and needed to be reinforced. However, this was not the case for marks placed intentionally; the target’s will would sustain it for much longer than normal.

“I’m glad it isn’t so easily removed...”

“Shut it! Didn’t His Majesty say he’d discuss allowing you to marry the princess when all this is done?! Did you forget what a great honor that is?!”

“Did he really?!” The scary man scratched the back of his head. When he noticed the young girl had been watching, he knelt down behind her and spoke in a gentle voice.

“It’s okay now. I’m sending you to my home. Don’t worry; I’ll be

there soon.”

She looked up at him, eyes wide, as she brought a hand up and pointed at the mark on his cheek. “It looks like a black rose,” she said.

He bared his teeth at her, like a beast showing its fangs. The expression made him look all the more ferocious.

But that face no longer frightened her.

★

The young girl had been worried that her selfish wish had ruined everything for the man who had saved her. Therefore, the very least she could do was find a way to remove that seal—that black rose.

To do that, she needed more time with him, so she decided to lie about her age. She told him she was three years younger than she actually was. When she reached maturity, she’d most likely be forced out of the man’s household, but for now the man did not suspect a thing and simply took her at her word. Three more years—even with that borrowed time, would she find a way? What should she do?

When the war finally ended and he returned home, the girl greeted him with a salute.

“Welcome home, sir! I, Darke, have decided to become a valiant knight just like you, so please accept me as your student! I welcome your guidance!”

And with that, she added one more lie to the ever-growing pile. It was a lie she had kept up ever since then.

★

Throughout her story, Darke would add strange sound effects, poke fun at Sashalia, or reword a thought mid-sentence.

“...and there you have it. That’s how Sir Gaius ended up with such unsavory monikers as ‘Ally-Killer’ and ‘Beldarus the Bloody-Bladed.’ His deeds were twisted by the earl when he became the prime minister, and then he had his people spread those rumors far and wide to get back at him.” She laughed as she concluded the tale, lightly tapping at her head with her knuckles as though knocking on a door.

Sashalia had long since pulled away from Darke’s embrace. As she spoke, the half-elf had shuddered more times than she could count. She finally realized what it was behind that smile, behind those eyes.

Darke had most likely gone mad, long before they ever met. Her goal to steal Gaius’s chastity was no joke—her warped sense of reasoning and ethics told her that this was the right thing, the *moral* thing, to do. Even if she lost both arms and legs, Darke would probably drag herself by her teeth to follow Gaius. And Sashalia had no doubt that if it would save his life, she’d gladly give her own

without hesitation.

Sashalia could feel sweat beading up along her back. And yet, she envied Darke. She was jealous. Not of her deep bond with Gaius—she was envious of Darke herself. Of her strength and tenacity. Her intense passion. The lengths to which she was willing to go.

She suddenly found it hard to meet the other woman's gaze. Fortunately, someone walked into the infirmary, giving her an excuse to look away.

It was the village elder. "You don't look so great," he said to Darke. "Let me take over for you."

"I appreciate it. I'll leave her with you, then." Darke stood up, and the two watched her leave. The village elder set down the large leaf he had been using as an umbrella, shaking the rainwater from his fur. He knelt down by the sunken fireplace, reached for the nearby pile of kindling, and set about making a fire.

The elder wasn't cold—he was summoning the fire spirits. While they did not have healing powers, fire spirits were among the most important, and so they were often called upon in rituals. And, even though Sashalia's leg was too far gone to be healed, that did not stop the elder from trying every day since the attack.

"It looks like your ear isn't in danger of infection...but how does your leg feel? Any improvement there?" he asked, to which Sashalia slowly shook her head.

"Well, it seems the spirits have taken a liking to you, little miss. They're working hard to help you out, so I'll keep them company while they get to work."

Sashalia giggled. "Thank you, sir. I'm happy to hear that." The village elder puffed with pride; it was rare for someone to tell him they enjoyed his presence. As they spoke, he changed the medicinal herb poultices that had been applied to her leg. A light green fog swirled around her knee as he worked—just as he'd said, the spirits were also trying again today.

"You know, elder, I don't think I've ever heard anyone say your name."

"Me? I'm Burning Quartz Flying Knuckle Handaxe of Powerful Magic Delicious."

"...Can I just keep calling you 'elder'?"

"Fine by me!" The elder held out a lidded bowl he'd brought with him. Sashalia braced herself for the bitter taste of her daily medicine and took as huge a gulp as she could.

Once she was done, he said "Thank you so much."

"B-But I really didn't do anything of use..."

"Nonsense! You risked your life to make sure the women and children could escape—and thanks to you, they did! I could thank you

for ten years straight and it still wouldn't be enough to express my gratitude! Only you could have done what you did out there. And you saved every last one of us. So please, I don't want you calling yourself useless anymore."

Sashalia felt the familiar burning sensation in her nose that meant tears would soon be following. She looked down into the bowl in her lap and took another swig of the medicine. She picked up a handkerchief beside her bed and pretended to wipe her mouth, instead catching the tears before they fell all the way down her cheeks.

"By the by, there's going to be a meeting tonight. Might bore you to tears, but I'd like you to be there," said the elder.

"Really? Can I?"

"Of course. I'll send one of the young ones to come and help you—hm?" The elder's ears twitched. "There it is again...some kid's making spirit calls again. All that chirping sure is annoying."

Sashalia remembered hearing the name before; someone had used it the day the children were attacked by adventurers. "That's right, there's a child out there who has shamanistic abilities, right? And the ability to use spirit calls is proof of that?"

The elder nodded. "Back in the day, our ancestors used them to communicate with spirits that couldn't manifest in this world. But now, it's nothing but annoying noise. There's something a little depressing about it, too."

Just then Sashalia felt as though lightning had struck her, and she bolted upright. Even her paralyzed leg tingled. She turned and grabbed the elder's shoulders tightly.

"Ho ho, what's the matter?" he chuckled, but the smile faded from his face once he saw how intently Sashalia was staring at him. The weary, self-pitying listlessness was gone, replaced by a tight-lipped, burning stare.

"Please, elder. Tell me everything you know about it."

★

By dusk, the rainfall had finally stopped. The homemakers all returned to their homes to prepare dinner, while everyone else set about the daily chores they'd been unable to do in the rain. The children raced about the plaza, trying to get in a little more play before the sun disappeared completely.

The elder sat on a log they used as a bench, taking a break. A lone human approached him: Gaius Beldarus.

"May I join you?"

"Hmph. If you want."

Gaius took a seat beside the kobold, who continued to watch the

children play.

“Elder... You know, I don’t believe I’ve heard your real name before.”

“It’s Burning Quartz Flying Knuckle Handaxe of Powerful Magic Delicious.”

“Sir Delicious, I—”

“Just call me ‘elder.’ So, what did you want to talk about?” They both continued to stare straight ahead as they spoke, neither turning to face the other.

“This morning, Red Eye and the others came to me with a request.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“They asked me to be the village chief, in order to see us through this crisis.”

“Is that so?”

“They’d like me to give them my answer at tonight’s meeting.”

“Yeah?” The elder scratched behind his ear.

“And...they told me this was your idea. That you’ve been suggesting it to the whole village.”

“Hm... Did I do that? Can’t quite recall.”

“Why, elder? They already have you.”

“This village needs a real leader—one who can protect it.”

“But I’m a human. Surely a kobold would be better suited for the role. Red Eye does a wonderful job of leading the others in farming, and Rain Grass is a brave warrior who always looks out for others.”

“They don’t know anything about the outside world.”

“If you only need me for my skills, then I can act as a guard. Shouldn’t the village be led by one of your own?”

“You really are dense, you know that?”

“I’m afraid I hear that quite often.”

“Don’t you get it...? They want *you* to lead them. They want to follow *you*.” The elder’s face appeared strained, but he continued. “You’ve had plenty of chances to leave. But every time, you stayed—and you *saved* us from those humans. Even though you know they might return with a much bigger army, you still haven’t made a run for it. Truth be told, I don’t even care that you’re human anymore. You care about this village, and everyone trusts you. That’s enough for me.”

Gaius listened in silence, at a loss for words.

“You know as well as I do that the younger ones won’t listen to me. They only agree with me on this because it’s something they already wanted.”

“And are you okay with this?”

“Hah! Of course not! It’ll be the death of our pure kobold history

and traditions!" The elder huffed, puffed, and fumed—but his protests were a little too exaggerated. They both fell silent, and for a while, the only voices in the plaza were the delighted cries of the young kobolds at play.

"...Sure are cute, aren't they..." the village elder said, breaking the silence.

"Adorable!"

"But I...I left them all behind. I ran away." The elder paused, and Gaius realized that the old kobold was trembling. He turned away once again. "On that day...I lost my wife, and my son and daughter...only one of my granddaughters survived.

"From what I heard, my son...he was stabbed by a spear. My wife and grandchildren were stuffed into a bag by those adventurers, then trampled to death."

Gaius continued facing away, but nodded to show that he was listening intently.

"And do you know what this doddering old fool did? I just ran, without even knowing what was being done to my own family! I was so damned afraid that I fell and stumbled over myself the whole way, while my poor grandkids were being butchered!"

They both knew that whether or not the elder had stayed, it would not have affected the outcome of that attack. Gaius refrained from telling him what he must have already told himself a hundred times before. In fact, it was *because* he knew there was nothing he could have done that the village elder was so consumed by grief and regret.

"Do you know what that's like?! How angry I've been?!"

Gaius listened to his pain in silence, sparing the elder the humiliation of seeing his tears. This was not the time for words; waiting patiently as the kobold confessed his deepest feelings was the best reply he could give.

"...I don't ever want anyone else to go through that. Compared to that, traditions and history don't mean a thing to me." The elder stood up and turned his back to Gaius. "You have your reasons. Just be sure to consider everyone else's, too."

★

That night in the assembly hall, Gaius stood before most of the villagers and made his announcement.

"I've decided I will not be the chief of your village."

The kobolds responded with gasps of surprise and disappointed sighs. Rain Grass and Emon, on the other hand, stood up and shouted.

"Why not, Gaius?!" demanded Rain Grass. "You know we don't care that you're human! Or do you just not want to do it?"

“Yeah, gramps!” Emon added. “Everyone’s practically beggin’ ye tae lead ’em!”

Darke stood behind Emon, and clamped a hand down on his shoulder. “That’s enough. Listen to what he has to say.”

Red Eye grabbed Rain Grass’s tail and yanked hard, urging his friend to calm down.

“I believe that it is best for the village’s sake if I don’t take on that role.” Gaius replied.

“I don’t get it,” Rain Grass protested. “We’d be much better off with you at the top. We’d finally stand a chance against the humans, and against the magic beasts in the forest. Your strength gives us hope.”

“And I’m glad for that. But what will you all do after I die? I could fall ill, or be cut down in battle, or succumb to some kind of accident. And even if none of that happened, I’m only growing older by the day. I’m not invincible, Rain Grass.”

Rain Grass had no response to that.

“What will you do then? What will your children do? And their children?”

“I-I’d...fight with all I’ve got...”

“Can you guarantee you’ll win every battle?”

“No, but...we could always make a run for it again...leave the village behind...”

“I doubt you’d find a more habitable place than this in all the Greatwood.”

“Probably not...” Rain Grass’s usual explosive conviction had vanished, each reply more meek than the last.

“That’s right. There’s nowhere else for you to run...”

A heavy silence fell over the entire room.

“...So running away is no longer an option. This is no longer just a village that can be abandoned or rebuilt. I’m going to make this our kingdom.”

Everyone looked at him in stunned surprise, still reeling from their earlier disappointment.

“I won’t become the chief just so we can scrape by and survive this crisis, or the next, or the next. I swear that I will dedicate everything I have to building a strong kingdom where you and your children can enjoy a future in peace.”

Gaius bared his teeth like a snarling beast. But the kobolds—now his subjects—knew him well enough to know what that expression on Gaius’s face truly meant.

“...King...”

The word floated seemingly by itself out into the air, muttered by no one in particular. The kobolds had heard it only once or twice, in

fantastic tales of days long gone. As more and more kobolds recalled the unfamiliar word, or heard those around them say it, they too tried it out for themselves.

“King...”

“He’s our king!”

“The Kobold King!”

The curious murmurs soon swelled into triumphant cries, as the kobolds turned to each other and exclaimed it again and again.

“Long live the Kobold King!” One aged voice stood out among the rest. The phrase spread like wildfire:

“Long live the king!”

“Long live the Kobold King!”

“Long live King Gaius!”

“Long live our kingdom!”

The new royal subjects gathered around their king as they cheered, and those who were closest to him enveloped him in an embrace. More and more kobolds clambered over each other for the chance to hug Gaius, and soon he was completely buried in furry bodies. He fell onto his backside under a mountain of soft, fluffy fur.

Sashalia walked up to Gaius, leaning on Darke for support. With great effort, she knelt before him.

“Miss Sashalia. Darke. Will you lend me your aid?”

The red-headed half-elf wavered slightly.

“Six years... For six years, I’ve waited to hear those words,” she said. “As unworthy as I am, I vow to help you however I can. I will be your sword or your councilor, whatever you need.”

“Thank you very much, Miss Sashalia.” Gaius smiled at her.

Clearly, she meant what she’d said from the bottom of her heart. Sashalia nodded back at him, sniffing.

Darke held onto Sashalia’s shoulder with one hand to help her stay upright. She made a fist with her remaining hand and placed it over her heart—the salute of the Knights of the Chain.

“My life is yours, now more so than ever. Please, use me in whatever way you wan—gah!” Her strange pledge was cut short by a sharp elbow to the stomach by Sashalia. Darke lost her balance and tumbled over, bringing the half-elf down with her. Emon pointed at the spectacle and laughed heartily.

“Emon, will you help me as well?” said Gaius.

“Do ye even need tae ask, gramps?”

“Ha ha ha, I suppose not.”

The young dwarf wedged himself between the two women, who had begun arguing, and stood before Gaius as well. The Kobold King held his hand out, and Emon firmly took it. Behind them, everyone rejoiced, their joyous cries echoing throughout the moonlit forest.

The coronation was held the very next day. As they were still in a time of war, the ceremony was modest and simple. Surrounded by every kobold in the village, one of the children placed a crown on Gaius's head.

It was a simple crown made of vines and grass, woven together by the kobold children. Gaius had decreed that the Kobold King should always wear a crown made of grass, vines, or flowering plants—one woven by those whose futures he swore to protect.

After all, that was the role of a king: to ensure a brighter future for his kingdom, for his people. The ones who truly made a ruler were his subjects—and their children.

The tiny kobold that had been appointed crown-bearer that day clambered down from Gaius's shoulders. He waited until the child was safely back on the ground before standing. His people cheered and cried in jubilation.

“Long live the Kobold King!”

“Long live the kingdom!”

The king waved back at his subjects.

Baron Gaius Beldarus. Captain of Igris's Royal Knights of the Chain.

Once upon a time, he had held those titles. But now, he was...the Kobold King.

Indeed, that was his true role.



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by Syousa.

Translated by Fatuma Muhamed
Edited by Michael Meeker

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